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THE LIFE OF OSCAR WILDE

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OSCAR WILDE.

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THE LIFE OF OSCAR WILDE

By ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD

With a Full Reprint of the famous Revolutionary Article, "Jacta Alea Est," which was written by Jane Francesca Elgee, who afterwards became the mother of Oscar Wilde, and an additional Chapter contributed by one of the Prison-Warders, who held this Unhappy Man in Gaol

ILLUSTRATED WITH PORTRAITS, FAC-SIMILE LETTERS, AND OTHER DOCUMENTS

WITHDRAWN
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T. WERNER LAURIE
CLIFFORD'S INN, LONDON
1906

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PUBLISHERS NOTE

The Life of Oscar Wilde

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1928

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

TO

T. M.

WHO, IN THE EXTREME OF ADVERSITY,
PROVED HIMSELF THE TRUE FRIEND OF AN UNHAPPY MAN
THIS BOOK IS
DEDICATED

"The heroes of literary as well as civil history have been very often no less remarkable for what they have suffered than for what they have achieved; and volumes have been written only to enumerate the miseries of the learned, and relate their unhappy lives and untimely deaths.

"To these mournful narratives, I am about to add the life of . . . a man whose writings entitle him to an eminent rank in the classes of learning, and whose misfortunes claim a degree of compassion not always due to the unhappy, as they were often the consequences of the crimes of others rather than his own."

Dr Samuel Johnson.

Preface

THE extract from the introductory passage of Dr Johnson's "Life of Richard Savage" which appears on one of the fly-leaves of this book sets forth in a manner singularly appropriate the impression which is produced on every thinking head and feeling heart by a contemplation of the career of Oscar Wilde.

Who, that follows his ascension to that "eternity of fame," of which he speaks in "De Profundis," and watches his sudden and headlong fall, will not echo those further words of that great, good Dr Johnson, of whom it may be said that had his like been living, at the time of Wilde's catastrophe, the whole after-story of Wilde's life would assuredly have been a less pitiful one.

"That affluence and power, advantages extrinsic and adventitious, and therefore easily separable from those by whom they are possessed, should very often flatter the mind with expectations of felicity which they cannot give, raises no astonishment: but it seems rational to hope that intellectual greatness should produce better effects; that minds qualified for

great attainments should first endeavour their own benefit ; and that they who are most able to teach others the way to happiness should, with most certainty, follow it themselves."

At the same time this must not be taken to convey that any close comparison can be instituted between Richard Savage and Oscar Wilde, either in point of capacity and performance, or of character, or indeed, except in respect of their vicissitudes, of career. It may, however, be of literary interest to observe one or two points of similitude in the characters of these two men.

One reads of Richard Savage as to his choice of friends :

" His time was spent in prison for the most part in study, or in receiving visits ; but sometimes he diverted himself with the conversation of criminals ; for it was not pleasing to him to be much without company ; and though he was very capable of a judicious choice, he was often contented with the first that offered."

It will be seen in the course of this book that even in prison Oscar Wilde took pleasure in the society and conversation of criminals. " The smaller natures and the meaner minds " still appealed to him, and he underwent punishment rather than forego their whispered exchange of words.

And it will further be seen in the narrative

of his prison life how truly it might be written of him what Dr Johnson wrote of Savage :

" . . . But here, as in every other scene of his life, he made use of such opportunities as occurred to him of benefiting those who were more miserable than himself, and was always ready to perform any office of humanity to his fellow-prisoners." And, generally, of both it is equally true, that :

" Whatever was his predominant inclination, neither hope nor fear hindered him from complying with it ; nor had opposition any other effect than to heighten his ardour, and irritate his vehemence."

With equal appositeness can the moral which Dr Johnson draws from his narrative be applied to this story also :

" This relation will not be wholly without its use, if those who languish under any part of his sufferings shall be enabled to fortify their patience by reflecting that they feel only those afflictions from which his abilities did not exempt him ; or those who, in confidence of superior capacities or attainments, disregarded the common maxims of life, shall be reminded that nothing will supply the want of prudence ; and that negligence and irregularity long continued will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible."

It is not, indeed, to point afresh this moral

that the present book has been written. The age desiderates no such lessons, resents them rather. Life is to-day ordered by a reconcilement of inclination and interest with the requirements of the written and unwritten laws. He sets out on a futile task who seeks to teach conduct from example however striking, for our present individualism will brook no such guidance. The purpose of this book is another and a threefold one. It is to give an authoritative record of the career of a remarkable man, of remarkable gifts and achievements; it is to give an account of the author's books and other works to that large section of the world which ignores his writings, which, like ninety-nine out of every hundred Frenchmen, for instance, has heard of his attainder, but knows nothing of his distinction; it is further to remove the false impressions, the misstatements of fact, the lying rumours, which, although the grave in Bagneux churchyard closed upon him only one bare lustre since, have gathered round his name and story in a cloud of misrepresentation of astonishing magnitude. It is, indeed, this last purpose which may be allowed to plead the opportunity of the present publication. It is now not too late to establish fact, to refute falsehood and to present a story freed from the supercharges of error or of malice. These floating rumours have not yet had the time to come together, to coagulate, and to

crystallise. Rumour can yet be unmasked as rumour, legend has not yet hardened into history, posthumous pasquinade has not yet dried on the tombstone.

It was one of the dead wit's sayings that of all the disciples of a man it is always Judas who writes his biography. In the present instance this paradox has less truth than ever. The writer was in no sense the disciple of Oscar Wilde ; he was indeed as strongly antagonistic to most of his principles, ethical, artistic, and philosophical, as he was warmly disposed to him for his many endearing qualities and captivating graces. His qualifications arise from the facts that for the period of sixteen years preceding Oscar Wilde's death he was intimately acquainted with him, that his friendship with him —of which elsewhere a true record exists—was continuous, and uninterrupted save by that act of God which puts a period to all human companionships, that he was with him at times when all others had withdrawn, and that for the very reason that he was not in sympathy with any of the affectations which towards others Oscar Wilde used to assume, the man as he truly was, the man as God and Nature had made him, was perhaps better known to him than to most of his other associates. The method of treatment which was adopted in that earlier record, to which reference has been made above, being no longer

imperative here, has been abandoned, with all the more alacrity on the part of the author that he has ever been in complete concordance with the general preference of objective to subjective treatment in the matter of biography. To-day, what three years ago was utterly impossible, he may yield to his own inclinations, because to-day it has become admissible that a biography of Oscar Wilde can be written and made public. The writer has no longer to seek how to arouse interest in his subject through the graduated emotions of curiosity, pity, amazement and sympathy. It is open to him to record facts, without having to palliate the offence of so recording them by an exposition of their incidence upon others. The upward climb, the attainment, the joys of conquest, the catastrophe, the precipitation, and the horrors of the abyss may now be depicted upon his canvas in plain fashion. The reader shall see them as they were ; he shall no longer be coaxed by a cunning elicitation of his sympathy for the teller of the story to listen to a tale against which prejudice, the voice of public opinion, and his own conception of what it is seemly and expedient for him to hear are ever prompting him to close his ears.

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD.

January 14th, 1906.

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The Life of Oscar Wilde

CHAPTER I

The Necessity of carefully tracing Oscar Wilde's Descent—The Real Date of his Birth—Probable Cause of the Error—His Admission to Mr Carson—His Distinguished Kinships—His Early Tastes—Early Successes—Alcohol as a Preserver of Life—Possible Consequences of a Dangerous Delusion—William Wilde's Skill as a Surgeon—"The Man whose Throat he Cut"—Another Famous Operation—The Voyage of *The Crusader*—A Successful First Book—His First Professional Earnings—What he did with them—He Founds a Hospital—His Noble Charity—The Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital—Honours and Knighthood—As a Land-Owner—His Literary Labours—Tributes to his Surgical Skill—"The Father of Modern Otology"—A Wife's Recognition—Other Traits of his Character.

WHEN Nature has bountifully endowed a man with every gracious gift which should ensure for him success and felicity in life; when she has made him the fit subject for the boundless admiration or the unrestrained envy of his contemporaries, and when this favoured and fortunate man suddenly discloses leanings, propensities, instincts, which, rapidly developing into passions he appears utterly powerless to bridle, precipitate him amidst the exuberant exultation of his

enemies and the stone-eyed dismay of his friends into an abyss of disgrace and misery, it becomes more particularly the duty of an equitable biographer to inquire if either heredity, or parental example, or early training and environment can in any degree help the world to understand the formidable physiological problem, how in one and the same man can be allied, supreme intelligence with reckless imprudence, a remarkable respect for society with an utter defiance of social observances, and the most refined hedonism with a taste for the coarsest frequentations.

In the case of Oscar Wilde, the problem, when his descent and kinship have been studied, becomes even more intricate and perplexing. For while in his immediate parentage will be discovered people whose incontestable genius was united, as is so often the case, with pronounced moral degeneracy, his ascending lines, traced back to remote generations, display such solid qualities of sane normality and civic excellence, that this unhappy man's aberration must appear one of those malignant, morbid developments which alarm and confound the psychologist when they unexpectedly produce themselves in a man's mentality, no less than as by the sudden development in the body of

malignant and morbid growths the practitioner is confounded and alarmed.

It therefore becomes necessary, before proceeding to the account of the strange vicissitudes of his life, to investigate with more than usual care, his descent and affinities. In this way alone can it be hoped that some light may be thrown upon the disquieting problem which his career discloses. It is an investigation, which, when the laws of atavism shall, with the progress of science, be better understood, may enable an enlightened posterity to judge a most remarkable man, in many ways an ornament to humanity, with the justice which was refused to him in his lifetime, and will continue to be refused to his memory as long as the mediæval obscurantism, from which we are only just beginning to emerge, still enswathes the minds of men.

So important is the object to be attained by this investigation—for what purpose can transcend the attainment of justice ?—that if in its course personal considerations are ousted, and the pious reverence due to the dead may appear to be disregarded, these sacrifices cannot but be considered as imperatively imposed.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born at No. 1 Merrion Square, in the city of Dublin, on the 16th October 1854. So great a part

of the task of telling the story of his life consists in correcting the mistakes of those who have written about him, in refuting unfair aspersions on his character, and in nailing venomous lies to the counter of public opinion, that particular attention may be called to the date of his birth. In such biographical notices of him as exist, the year in which this unhappy man was ushered into a world where he was to suffer so greatly is given as 1856. He was *not* born in 1856, but two years earlier. As this narrative proceeds negations of far greater importance will have to be put upon record. His life, indeed, like that of many men who have been made the victims of the unreasoning hatred of his countrymen, might be almost told in a series of denials of current lies concerning his character and his deeds.

As to the particular inaccuracy, however, to which attention is drawn above, it probably arose from his own misstatement. He professed an adoration for youth ; his works contain many almost rhapsodical eulogies of physical and mental immaturity; and no doubt that as he himself drew nearer to what he satirised in his plays as " the usual age," he gave as the year of his birth a date which made him appear two years younger than he really was. A friend of his, on one occasion, endeavoured to point out

to him that a man might derivé far greater satisfaction in giving out his age as more advanced than it really was, in posturing as old in years while younger in fact, in hugging to his heart the secret reserve of days. But he refused to admit it.

In his cross-examination by Mr Carson during the trial of Lord Queensberry he was forced to admit the truth as to the date of his birth. The following remarks were then exchanged between the prosecutor and the Marquess's counsel :

" Mr Carson : ' You stated your age as thirty-nine. I think you are over forty ? '

" The Witness : ' I am thirty-nine or forty. You have my birth-certificate and that settles the matter.'

" Mr Carson : ' You were born in 1854—that makes you over forty ? '

" The Witness : ' Ah ! ' "

This " Ah ! " sounded like a sarcastic note of admiration for the barrister's skill in arithmetic. How it was calculated to wound the defending counsel will be indicated later.

For months before Oscar Wilde was born his mother had earnestly desired that the child should be a girl.[1] She often expressed her con-

[1] This fact, like every other fact recorded in this book, is given on unimpeachable authority.

viction that a daughter was going to be born to her. She used to tell friends of the things she was going to do "after my little girl is born," and used to discuss the education she proposed to give to her daughter. When Oscar was born, her disappointment was great. She refused to admit that her new child was a boy. She used to treat him, to speak of him as a girl, and as long as it was possible to do so, she dressed him like one. To pathologists these facts will appear of importance.

Oscar Wilde was the second son and child, issue of the marriage between William Robert Wills Wilde, oculist and otologist (1815-1876), and of Jane Francesca Elgee, poetess and pamphleteer (1826-1896), which was celebrated in Dublin in 1851.

For his parents he ever felt the deepest affection and respect. For his mother in particular this affection reached the degree of veneration. In filial piety and love he gave a noble example to humanity.

The feelings which he entertained towards his mother and father are expressed in language of lofty eloquence in the book, "De Profundis," which he wrote while a prisoner in Reading Gaol, during the last six months of his confinement there. He has referred to his mother's death, and he adds :

"No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archæology, and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low byword among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to foes that they might turn it into a synonym for folly. What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write, or paper to record. My wife, always kind and gentle to me, rather than that I should hear the news from indifferent lips, travelled, ill as she was, all the way from Genoa to England to break to me herself the tidings of so irreparable, so irredeemable, a loss."

Mr William Wilde (afterwards, Sir William Wilde), the surgeon, was a product of that intermixture of races in Ireland of which, speaking at a meeting of the British Association held in Belfast, he said: "I think that there cannot be a better fusion of races than that of the Saxon with the Celt." His grandfather, Ralph Wilde,

was the son of a Durham business-man, and towards the middle of the eighteenth century was sent over to Ireland to seek his fortunes. The region which was selected for him for the exercise of his ability was that Connaught which Cromwell's soldiers described as the alternative to Hell[1] . . Here, after a while, he became land-agent to the Sandford family. He settled in Castlerea, in the county of Roscommon, where he married a Miss O'Flyn, the daughter of a very ancient Irish family which gave its name to a district in Roscommon, still known as O'Flyn's County. Ralph Wilde had several children. One of them, Ralph Wilde, who was a distinguished scholar, and who like his grand-nephew, Oscar Wilde, won the distinction of the Berkeley Gold Medal at Trinity College, Dublin, became a clergyman ; another, Thomas Wilde, was a country physician. This Thomas Wilde married a Miss Fynn, who was related by descent to the eminent families of Surridge and Ouseley of Dunmore in the county of Galway. The Ouseleys were most distinguished people. Sir Ralph Ouseley, Bart., who was a very famous Oriental scholar, was British Ambassador to Persia. His brother, Sir William Ouseley, was

[1] " To Hell or Connaught " was the alternative proposed by the English invaders to the Irish peasants whom they hunted off their lands like wild beasts.

secretary to Lord Wellesley in India. General Sir Ralph Ouseley won great distinction in the Peninsular War. His brother was a famous preacher and writer of theological works, of which the most famous is the book entitled "Old Christianity." Of this kinsman Oscar Wilde used to relate many anecdotes. He appeared to be much impressed by the sonority and suggestiveness of his name : Gideon Ouseley. On one occasion speaking of titles of novels he recommended to a friend to write a book of which the hero should bear the name of "Gideon Ouseley," and to use the hero's name as the title of the story. He declared that a book with such a title could not fail to appeal to the public.

Gideon Ouseley, Methodist, was the John Wesley of Ireland. His sermons in the Irish language, addressed to people at the fairs and markets, are still preserved in the memory of people living in the western province from hearsay from their parents.

William Robert Wills Wilde was the son of Dr Thomas Wilde by his marriage with Miss Fynn. He was born in Castlerea in 1815, and received his education at the Royal School, Banagher. It is, however, reported of him that "fishing occupied more of his attention than school studies, for which he had an admirable teacher

in the person of Paddy Walsh, afterwards immortalised by the pupil in his Irish " Popular Superstitions."

In the Dublin *University Magazine* the following account is given of youthful tastes which led to studies of which in later life he was to make such excellent use.

" The delight of the fisher lad was to spend his time on the banks of the lakes and rivers within his reach, talk Irish with the people, and listen to the recital of the fairy legends and tales; his knowledge of which he so well turned to account in the ' Irish Popular Superstitions.' His taste for antiquarian research was early exhibited, and much fostered by his repeated examinations of the cahirs, forts and caves of the early Irish which exist in the vicinity of Castlerea, as well as by visits to the plain of Ruthcragan, the site of the great palace and cemetery of the chieftains of the West. In the district around were castles, whose legends he learned, patterns, where he witnessed the strange mixture of pilgrimage, devotion, fun and frolic; cockfights for which Roscommon was then famous; and the various superstitions and ceremonies connected with the succession of the festivals of the season—all these made a deep impression on the romantic nature of young Wilde, and many of them have

been handed down to posterity by his facile pen."

His professional studies commenced in 1832. As a medical student he acted as clinical clerk to Dr Evory Kennedy in the Lying-In-Hospital, and obtained the annual prize there against several English and Irish competitors. In studying for this examination he so overworked himself that his health broke down, and a fever setting in his life was for some time despaired of. He was actually suffering from the fever which went so nigh to kill him, on the very day of the examination. The case, indeed, was despaired of, until Dr Robert Greaves having been sent for, an hourly glass of strong ale was prescribed as the only remedy from which any results might be expected. It was held at the time that it was, indeed, the administration of this stimulant which saved his life. The idea was no doubt an erroneous one, according to modern medical science, and the delusion may very possibly have been the cause of much subsequent mischief in the young man's family. In a household the head of which attributes the saving of his life to the use of alcohol in copious doses the practice of temperance will naturally enough be looked for in vain; and it is no doubt at home that those habits of drinking were fostered which were to

make such havoc in the lives of William Wilde's two sons. As to which it should be added here that although Oscar Wilde was in no sense a hard drinker, and never by his most intimate friends was once seen in a state of intoxication, it is on record that every single foolish and mad act which he did in his life, acts which had for him the most disastrous consequences, was done under the influence of liquor. It is one of the most damnable qualities of alcohol that where in a man any morbid tendency either physical or moral exists, which, sober, he can keep under complete control, the use of strong drink will bring it to the surface. The French doctors say of alcohol that it gives the *coup de fouet* (the lash of the whip) to any disease either of the body or of the brain which may be present in a sub-acute state in a man who indulges in strong drink. No doubt that, because in his home in Merrion Square, Oscar Wilde had always heard the virtues of alcohol celebrated as a drug which on a famous occasion had saved his father's life, he did not attach importance to the teachings of later and more advanced science, which would have taught him that in his case the poison might produce results the most disastrous.

William Wilde is still remembered as a surgeon of particular resource and courage. Even as a

medical apprentice he displayed these qualities. It is related of him on reaching the parish church in Cong, in the County Mayo, one Sunday morning, he found the place in a state of huge commotion. It appeared that a small boy of about five years of age, having swallowed a piece of hard boiled potato, which had stuck in his throat, was in the act of choking. The young medical student, with the readiness which afterwards distinguished him amongst his contemporaries, saw at a glance that an immediate operation must be effected if the child's life was to be saved. He happened to have a pair of scissors in his pocket ; he was fortunately not restrained by the modern terror of using any instrument which had not been rendered antiseptic ; and he boldly cut into the boy's throat. The operation was entirely successful, and the child recovered. He may be living still, for when he was last heard of, in Philadelphia in 1875, he was a middle-aged man, who took a particular pride and pleasure in showing people a scar on his neck " where," as he used to say, " the famous Sir William Wilde of Dublin cut my throat." It was with similar readiness that Sir William once saved the sight of a Dublin fisherman, who was brought to him with a darning-needle embedded up to the head in his

right eye. The flapping of a sail in which the needle was sticking had driven it in with terrible force. An ordinary operation was out of the question ; there was not enough of the head protruding to allow of any hold being got on it with a forceps by which it might have drawn from its place. The man was suffering terrible agony. Sir William saw at once what was the only means of extracting the needle. He sent for a powerful electro-magnet, by the help of which in the shortest time the steel bar was extracted. There are on record many similar instances of his energy, courage and fertility of resource.

Already as a young man he distinguished himself in the field of letters. While still a medical student he sailed in charge of a sick gentleman on board the yacht *Crusader*, visiting many places in the Mediterranean and in the East, during a cruise which lasted many months. The account of this cruise he published on his return to Ireland. He found in the Messrs Curry ready and liberal publishers. For the copyright of this young man's book they paid him a sum of £250. The speculation was a profitable one for them. The first edition consisted of 1250 copies of the book, which was issued in two volumes at 28s. This edition was

sold out immediately ; a second edition was as rapidly disposed of, and other editions followed. The book has long since been out of print.

The young man continued his medical studies in London, Berlin and Vienna, and finally started in medical practice in July 1841, selecting as special branches, those of oculist and otologist. He took as the motto of his professional career, the words : " Whatever thou hast to do, do it with all thy might." His reputation was already so good, that in the first year of his practice he earned in professional fees the sum of £400, which it appears, is an amount very rarely reached by the fees of a surgeon in his first year.

This money he devoted in its entirety to the charitable purpose of founding a hospital where the poor could be treated for eye and ear diseases. At that time no such institution existed in the Irish capital. He did more than this. He applied the first thousand pounds of his professional earnings to his noble purpose. To him in this manner the city of Dublin and the whole country of Ireland owe the foundation of St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital,[1] which for sixty-four years has rendered such inestimable services to the suffering Irish poor, and which increases

[1] Since its amalgamation with the National Eye and Ear Infirmary, Molesworth Street, Dublin, this institution has become known as the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital.

in usefulness every year of its existence. The last annual report gives a record of benevolent activity which few hospitals, which started with resources so meagre, can show. It is a noble institution, the foundation stone of which was the noble sacrifice of a noble man. The following extract from the first annual report, issued in 1844, gives an interesting account of its first establishment.

" Although most of the large hospitals in this city and the several infirmaries, poorhouses, and other institutions in Ireland which afford indoor medical relief admit patients labouring under affections of the organs of sight and hearing there has not up to the present period existed in this country any special hospital for treating the diseases of the eye and ear.

" The want of such an establishment, upon a scale so extensive as to afford general relief, has long been felt by the poor, and is generally acknowledged by the upper classes of society. . . . . In the year 1841 a dispensary for treating the diseases of these organs was established in South Frederick Lane, and supported by its founder, Sir William Wilde for twelve months ; at the end of which time, finding the number of applicants and the consequent expenditure far exceeding what was originally con-

templated, or what could be supported by individual exertion, and not wishing to apply for public aid for the sum required to defray its expenses, he determined to try the experiment of making it support itself, by a monthly subscription from each of the patients. This plan succeeded fully, and since September 1842 the patients have each paid a small monthly sum during the period of their attendance, which has defrayed the expenses of the medicine. In this way, 1056 persons were treated during the year ending September 1843, and the total number of patients relieved with medicine, medical advice, or by operation, from the commencement of that institution to the 1st March 1844, was 2075. Paupers have, however, at all times received advice and medicine gratuitously. The sum paid by each patient is but sixpence per month, and this system of partial payments has been found to work exceedingly well. It has produced care, regularity and attention, and induced a spirit of independence among the lower orders of society worthy of countenance and support, while the annual sum of £50 received in this way is in itself a sufficient guarantee. . . that its benefits are appreciated by the poor, numbers of whom seek its advantages from distant parts of the country."

Through a Mr Grimshaw, a dentist, William Wilde obtained the use of a stable in Frederick Lane, which was to form the nucleus of the hospital, which afterwards developed into such a splendid institution. Having provided a few fixtures, the young surgeon commenced his gratuitous labours, which he continued throughout the whole of his career. An inscription in the front of the hospital records the name of its founder, and in the hall stands a bust of Sir William Wilde, which was purchased by direction of the head surgeon at the sale of the effects of William Wilde, his eldest son, after his death in Cheltenham Terrace, Chelsea.

In 1848 he published what has been described as "one of the most chivalous literary efforts," his account of "The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life."

Two years after his marriage with Miss Jane Francesca Elgee, that is to say in 1853, he was appointed Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary to the Queen, which was the first appointment of the kind made in Ireland. In 1857 he visited Stockholm, and was created a Chevalier of the Kingdom of Sweden, and was, further, decorated with the Order of the Polar Star. Seven years later, at the conclusion of a chapter of the Knights of St Patrick, held for the installation of

new members of this Order, and after the knights had left the hall, the genial Lord Carlisle, Viceroy, from his place on the throne addressed the great surgeon, beckoning to him to approach, and said : " Mr Wilde, I propose to confer on you the honour of knighthood, not so much in recognition of your high professional reputation, which is European, and has been recognised by many countries in Europe, but to mark my sense of the services you have rendered to Statistical Science, especially in connection with the Irish Census."

There was nothing of the cynic in Lord Carlisle, and his remarks to William Wilde were sincere as a compliment. One can imagine the mental reservations that say Lord Beaconsfield or Lord Lytton would have made had they been in Lord Carlisle's place and had they been called upon to announce the impending honour to the man who had distinguished himself by his labours on behalf of the Irish Census. For no document more than an Irish Census Report contains so scathing an indictment of Castle rule ; nothing that Speranza ever wrote constituted a more violent appeal to Irish Nationalists ; no Fenian denunciation of the Sassenach has ever exceeded in bitterness of reproach the simple total of numerals which William Wilde's labours com-

pelled the British Government to lay before the people of Europe.

For the rest, the honour of knighthood appears to be distributed with greater largesse in Ireland than even in England or Scotland, and it really seems that it is in Dublin a distinction for a professional man not to have received the tap of the viceroy's sword. Wilde's acceptance of the honour was resented in some places, for it was thought that the husband of Speranza ought not to have taken favours from the Castle, just as some years later Speranza's acceptance of a pension from the British Government which she had so fiercely attacked in her youth, was also resented.

In a biographical notice of Sir William Wilde which was published in 1875, one year before his death, where reference is made to another honour which was won by him, the following passage occurs, which, read to-day, has a peculiarly pathetic interest.

"In connection with the award of the Cunningham medal of the Royal Irish Academy in 1873 to Sir William Wilde, it is a remarkable fact, worthy of record, that within a few months of its presentation, his two sons, William and Oscar, were each awarded a medal of Trinity College--the former (who has just been called

to the Irish bar) by the College Philosophical Society for ethics and logic, and the latter (who is now (1875) a distinguished scholar at Oxford) for the best answering on the Greek drama."

Sir William Wilde was too hospitable and too charitable a man to amass any large fortune such as would have been acquired by most men of his professional ability and European reputation, but at the time of his death he was in the comfortable position of a substantial landowner. "Some years ago," says a notice of him, "Sir William Wilde became a proprietor in the county of Mayo, where he has most successfully carried out schemes of improvement, and has shown that he can reclaim land and profitably carry on farming operations, which is what few of even resident proprietors can boast. Finding a portion of the ancestral estate of the O'Flyns (from whom he is maternally descended) for sale in the Land Estate Court, he became the purchaser. The portion in cultivation was covered by a wretched pauper tenantry, numbers of whom it became necessary to remove to enable those remaining to have a means of comfortable existence. Understanding somewhat of the language of the people, and being, as they said, "one of the ould stock," he was able with advice from the Catholic clergy to carry out

his plans without exciting discontent or involving the sacrifice of large sums of money and he gave an ample tenant right to those that remained on the property over twelve years ago. The reclamation that followed, with the addition of erecting a residence for himself in a most picturesque situation, has converted a locality characterised only a few years ago by the usual evidences of neglect, into one of the most attractive and charming spots in the country. In fact, Mayhera House, near Cong, with the surrounding grounds and estate, may be fairly claimed as one of the numerous triumphs of the enterprising proprietor."

He wrote many works on Irish history and archæology, and was engaged on a biographical work at the time of his death. He founded the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Science*. His life is one long record of beneficent activity. He carried out to the end the motto which he had taken for his guide at the outset of his career. He is recognised as one of the greatest surgeons of the last century, and the recognition is universal. And it should be remembered that the reputation of a great surgeon cannot be disturbed by the discoveries of posterity as is the case with men, who as doctors, have obtained in one age the fame of great luminaries

SIR WILLIAM WILDE.

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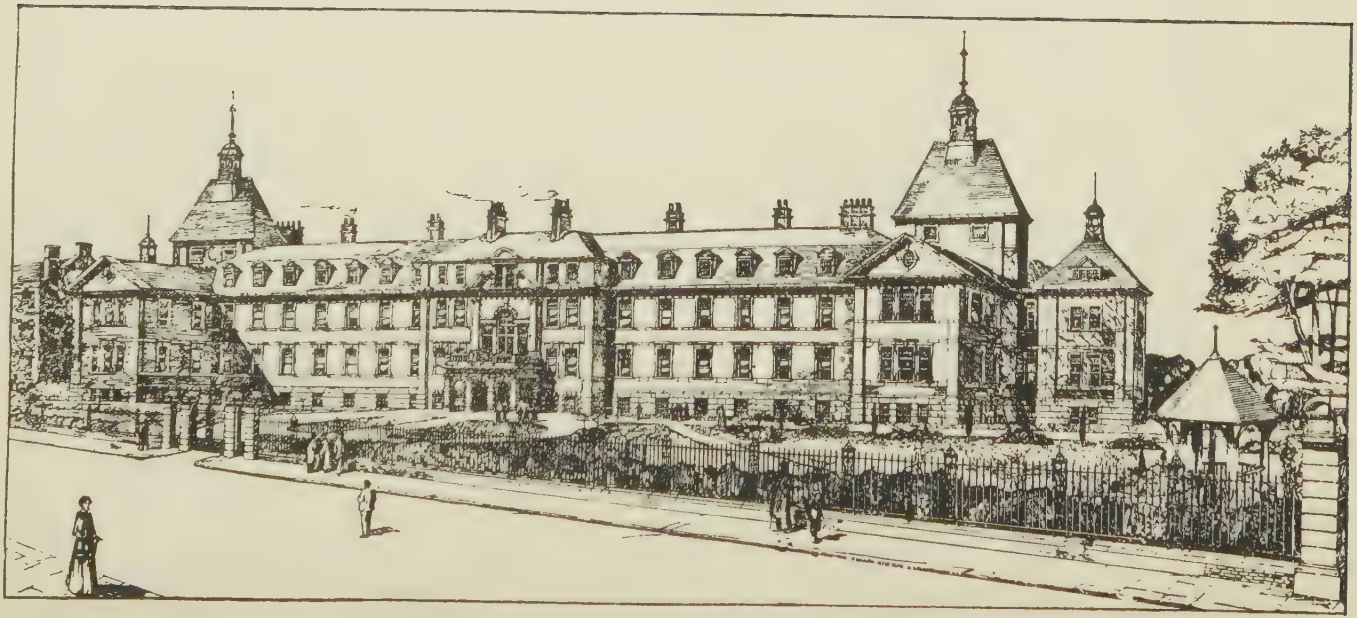
of science, and who, as knowledge progresses, reveal themselves to a mocking world to have been the veriest merry-andrews.

" Wilde's Arbeitsfeld war die Klinik " (Wilde's field was the operating-room), says of him a great German writer on surgery. Elsewhere in German medical books of the highest authority, the Irish surgeon is referred to in the most eulogistic terms. Now praise from German scientific men, who for the most part seem to hold that light can come from nowhere in the world but a German university-town, and who have too often distinguished themselves by a manifestation of envy and a spirit of almost feminine *dénigrement*, is the sincerest praise that a British subject may ever hope to reap. One writer describes Wilde as, " ein Meister in genialer Schlussfolgerungen " (a master in deductions inspired by genius). Another German authority says of him : " auch in seinem lebhaften und praktischen Interesse fuer Taubstumme erinnert uns Wilde an Itard " (in his strong and practical interest in deaf mutes also, Wilde reminds us of Itard). Schwarze describes him as " the father of modern otology." Indeed, it appears that as an otologist he was even greater than as an oculist. At a recent conference of medical men in Zuerich when the great pioneers

of modern surgery were being discussed in a lecture, only three British surgeons were named, and these were Graves, Stokes, and Wilde. In Dublin medical circles he is still spoken of with the highest respect. Most contemporary doctors of his day would now be mentioned with the pitying smile with which modern physicians refer to all their predecessors whose studies were completed before the year 1889 swept away the clouds which had obscured the vision of the men who profess to heal. Mr J. B. Story, F.R.C.S.I., who was senior surgeon of the St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, and who since its transformation into the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital is continuing the work of Sir William Wilde at that splendid institution, is most eloquent in the praise of his predecessor's skill and science. He also holds that Sir William was greater as an aural surgeon than as an eye-doctor, but in both fields he considers him to have been one of the most distinguished surgeons that Great Britain has yet produced.

The same unanimity of praise is accorded to his literary work. Perhaps the most interesting reference to his qualities as a writer on the special subjects which he chose is contained in a passage which occurs in the preface which his wife, Lady Wilde, wrote to the life of Béranger,



ROYAL VICTORIA EYE AND EAR HOSPITAL TO-DAY.. FOUNDED BY SIR W. WILDE.

which her husband had left uncompleted at the time of his death, and which Lady Wilde finished. She begins by saying what diffidence she feels to take up the pen which her husband had let fall, so strongly does she feel her inferiority to him, and goes on to say :

" There was probably no man of his generation more versed in our national literature, in all that concerned the land and the people, the arts, architecture, topography, statistics, and even the legends of the country ; but, above all, in his favourite department, the descriptive illustration of Ireland, past and present, in historic and prehistoric times, he has justly gained a wide reputation, as one of the most learned and accurate, and at the same time one of the most popular writers of the age on Irish subjects . . . in the misty cloudland of Irish antiquities he may especially be looked upon as a safe and steadfast guide."

His charitableness and compassion for human suffering were such that although he was a pleasure-loving man he was ever ready, at a moment's notice, to leave the gayest and happiest social reunion to attend to the wants of some patient who might be in need of his gratuitous assistance. An anecdote in Fitzpatrick's " Life of Lever," communicated to the biographer by

John Lever, the novelist's nephew, illustrates this benevolent trait in the great surgeon's character.

"On one occasion he (Lever) wanted Wilde to come and meet at dinner some friends he had assembled, and calling at Merrion Square was told that the doctor could not possibly appear. Being denied several times, my uncle at last put his handkerchief in bandage form over his merry, twinkling eyes; his expedient brought the oculist to the door in a moment; the *rencontre* ending in a hearty laugh at the success of the trick—which continued to afford much amusement at Templerogue."

Sir William Wilde died after a long illness on Wednesday, 19th April 1876, and was buried at Mount Jerome cemetery. His hearse was followed to the grave by a large and representative procession. The principal mourners were Mr W. Wilde, Mr Oscar Wilde, and the Rev. Mr Noble. All the Dublin papers published long obituary notices of the man, and the whole country deplored his loss.

How pleasant it would be if this man's memory could be left undisturbed as that of one who was great and good, if nothing needed to be said which may tarnish in some degree a reputation so nobly won. Alas! the exigencies of this

biography exact, in justice to its immediate subject, a closer investigation into the moral composition of one who, together with many sterling qualities, may have transmitted to his son certain leanings, instincts, passions, which shall help us to understand the dismaying problem of that son's conduct of his life.

It may be briefly then stated that together with a high reputation as a man of science and as a kind-hearted, genial and charitable man, Sir William Wilde had also the evil repute of being a man of strong, unbridled passions, in the gratification of which no sense of social or professional responsibility could restrain him. A characteristic anecdote of a stinging retort made to him by a veterinary surgeon whom he once met, while out riding in Phoenix Park, is still told, and public opinion ever held that the veterinary surgeon's critique was just and right. One of these patients, a Miss Travers, indeed brought an action against the Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary, but the woman's sanity appeared doubtful, and the case was dismissed. His son Oscar used to relate of his mother as an instance of her noble serenity towards life how, when she was nursing his father on his dying bed, each morning there used to come into the sickroom the veiled and silent

figure of a woman in deep mourning who sat and watched but never spoke, and at nightfall went away, to return on the following morning. It may be noted as a significant fact that the son seemed to see no aspersion on his father's reputation in this story. It appeared to him to be an apt illustration of his mother's nobility of character. Sir William Wilde left besides his legitimate children a number of natural offspring. One natural son of his was established by him as a surgeon-oculist in a practice in Lower Baggot Street, about two hundred yards from his wife's home. The man died some years ago, but is still remembered as the son of Sir William Wilde.

Another trait in his character which it may be worth while to note, because this characteristic was undoubtedly transmitted to one of his sons, namely to Oscar's brother, was his great neglect of himself. He was very shabby and careless about his appearance. He used to be spoken of as one of the untidiest men in Ireland. An anecdote is told of Father Healy which illustrates the reputation that Sir William had in this respect. At a dinner-party at which the Father was present, and which was held shortly after Sir William Wilde had been knighted, an Englishman who had just crossed from Holy-

head was complaining of the sea-passage he had been through. "It was, I think," he said, "the dirtiest night I have ever seen." "Oh," said Father Healy, "then it must have been wild."

The portraits of Sir William which exist, showing him at different ages, reveal, as few physiognomies can do, an extraordinary mixture of intellectuality and animalism, of benevolence and humanity with bestial instinct. Mr Harry Furniss has included him in his gallery of "Ugly Men and Women." The qualification is hardly a just one. As to the upper part of his face, Sir William was remarkably handsome. No one with such a forehead and such eyes could be called ugly. But the lower part of his face and especially the almost simian mouth are very bad. In his son Oscar the same extraordinary contrast between the upper and lower parts of his face was to be observed. He had the forehead and eyes of a genius, or an angel. His mouth was ugly, almost abnormal, and such as to justify the accuracy if not the charitableness of his strong enemy, the Marquess of Queensberry, in an inhuman jest about his personal appearance, which he made just after the poor man's conviction.

CHAPTER II

Oscar Wilde's Mother—Her Gift for Languages—Oscar's Extreme Linguistic Facility — Lady Wilde's Scholarship—The Consolations of Æschylus—Her Serenity—Her *Schwaermerei*—Oscar's Dissimilarity in this Respect—The Preponderating Maternal Influence—Probable Physiological Consequences—The Elgee's Italian Descent—Archdeacon Elgee — "One of the Saints of the Wexford Calendar"—Lady Wilde *not* his Grand-daughter—An Incident of 1798—Dr Kingsbury—Lady Wilde's Distinguished Relations—The Rev. Charles Maturin—Balzac's Tribute to Maturin—How he stood Sponsor to Oscar—Clarence Mangan's Description of Maturin—Francesca Elgee's Nationalism—"Speranza" and "John Fenshaw Ellis"—Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, Revolutionary—The Villa Marguerite, Nice—His Journal *The Nation*—Number 304—"Jacta Alea Est"—Other Contents of Number 304.

THERE can be no doubt that from his mother, for whom he ever felt so great a love and so deep a reverence, Oscar Wilde inherited many of those admirable gifts and graces which so distinguished him amongst his contemporaries. Even as Lady Wilde, Oscar had an astonishing facility for learning languages. "My favourite study," she once related, "was languages; I succeeded in mastering two European languages before my eighteenth year." It is on record that Oscar Wilde was able to learn the difficult German

language in an incredibly short time. We are informed in "The Story of the Unhappy Friendship," that "during the railway journeys which he took in England in connection with his lecturing tour in the winter of 1883-1884, carrying a small pocket-dictionary and a volume of Heine with him, one book in each pocket of his fur-lined overcoat, he taught himself German so thoroughly that afterwards the whole of German literature was open to him." Lady Wilde was a wonderful classical scholar; she had the sheer delight in Latin and Greek literature that true scholars manifest; and made of the Roman orators or the Greek tragedians her favourite reading. A lady once called at No. 1 Merrion Square and found Sir William's house in the possession of the bailiffs. "There were two strange men," this lady relates, "sitting in the hall, and I heard from the weeping servant that they were 'men in possession.' I felt so sorry for poor Lady Wilde and hurried upstairs to the drawing-room where I knew I should find her. Speranza was there indeed, but seemed not in the least troubled by the state of affairs in the house. I found her lying on the sofa reading the Prometheus Vinctus of Æschylus, from which she began to declaim passages to me, with exalted enthusiasm. She would not let me slip

in a word of condolence, but seemed very anxious that I should share her entire admiration for the beauties of the Greek tragedian which she was reciting." Of Oscar Wilde's scholarship nothing need be said here. His reputation in that respect is well-established. On what this reputation was based will appear hereafter.

Lady Wilde was a brilliant talker: was there ever in the world a more brilliant conversationalist than Oscar Wilde? Lady Wilde's serenity and tolerance reached a level to which none but great philosophers have attained. This tolerance and resignation she taught to her son, as some mothers teach their sons those imbecilities which in the aggregate are known as worldly wisdom. "My mother," writes Oscar Wilde, "who knew life as a whole, used often to quote to me Goethe's lines—written by Carlyle in a book he had given her years ago, and translated by him, I fancy, also :—

> "'Who never ate his bread in sorrow,
> Who never spent the midnight hours
> Weeping and waiting for the morrow,—
> He knows you not, ye heavenly powers.'

"They were the lines which that noble Queen of Prussia, whom Napoleon treated with such coarse brutality, used to quote in her humiliation and exile; they were the lines my mother often

quoted in the troubles of her later life. I absolutely declined to accept or admit the enormous truth hidden in them. I could not understand it. I remember quite well how I used to tell her that I did not want to eat my bread in sorrow, or to pass any night weeping and watching for the dawn."

Yet the second verse, which seems to have been overlooked by Lady Wilde as well as by Queen Louisa, was one from which, had it been taught him also, the prisoner might have derived consolation. Goethe here formulates the law of predestination with the implacability of a Calvin or a Mahomet.

> " Ihr fuehrt ins Leben ihn hinein
> Und laesst den Armen schuldig werden
> Dann uebergiebt Ihr ihn dem Pein
> Denn jede Schuld raecht sich auf Erden."

It is always a dangerous thing to mutilate a thought.

A German word which well describes one trait of Speranza's character, and which is not easily translated into English, is *Schwaermerisch*. This adjective describes a state of gushing exaltation, a somewhat too ready enthusiasm, a capacity for discovering romance in what is trite and commonplace. The word conveys mild and tolerant censure, and generally suggests that the

person to whom it is applied is too much taken up in daydreams to give much attention to orderliness and the other domestic virtues. One feels that but for Speranza's *Schwaermerei* there would have been no bailiffs ever to be found in the hall of the fine house in Merrion Square, and that the Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary would not have been allowed to go out into the streets of Dublin in the neglected condition which inspired Father Healy's mordant jibe.

There was nothing of the *Schwaermer* in Oscar Wilde's composition. He had no penchant for enthusiasm, exaltation he never displayed; and though as a writer he enrolled himself under that *drapeau romantique des jeunes guerriers* of which Théophile Gautier speaks, as a man of the world he avoided romance. He was for precision, for the absolute, for rule and proof. He was at one and the same time a perfect grammarian and an excellent logician. And that, in spite of the restraint of his reason, he gave way to promptings so illogical as those that led to his catastrophe shows that at times, and under certain conditions, his reason failed him.

While he inherited from his mother many distinguished qualities, it may be deduced from his life that the preponderating maternal influence in his composition was responsible also for

that abnormality of conduct which was the direct cause of his downfall. (It is a matter of common observation among physiologists that where a child is born to a couple in which the woman has the much stronger nature and a great mental superiority over the father the chances are that that child will develop at certain critical periods in his career an extraordinary attraction towards persons of its own sex. This fact is one of Nature's mysteries.) Those who believe in a Divine Creation of the world should reverently bow their heads before what they cannot understand and ought to take to be a divine dispensation. At any rate, the wisdom of Nature may be presumed greater than that of the Ecclesiastical Courts.

It is held in Ireland amongst people who knew the Elgee family that Lady's Wilde's assertion that her ancestors were of Italian origin, that the name Elgee is a corruption of the patronymic Alighieri which would have implied a descent from, or, at least, a kinship to, the immortal Dante, was but the outcome of a vivid and self-deceiving imagination. Her conversation afforded many instances of this habit of self-delusion. Things that she wished to be facts soon became invested in her mind with the solidity of such. Her day-dreams embodied themselves. For this

her characteristic of *Schwaermerei* accounts also. Her sons never repeated the legend of any Florentine descent, though Willy, at least, was not averse to boast of his relationships. Oscar, on the other hand, apart from his occasional references to the cousin who had so sonorous a name, Gideon Ouseley, and to that other cousin, Wills, who combined with dramatic genius a mass of genial eccentricity, never spoke of his relations. He had an instinctive horror of anything approaching to self-aggrandisement, which he used to describe as the worst form of vulgarity. According to Lady Wilde, the Alighieri who first settled in Ireland and whose name was corrupted into Elgee was her great-grandfather. This man's son was the famous Archdeacon Elgee of Wexford. Here another negation is necessary. Lady Wilde was *not* the daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman; she was *not* the daughter of Archdeacon Elgee. Yet these misstatements are reproduced in the authoritative biographical notices which have been published about her. In a letter which she wrote on 10th August 1893 to Mr D. J. O'Donoghue of Dublin, the author of an admirable "Life of Mangan," she writes, referring to one of these biographical errors:—"In the sketch given of myself I regret that I was not named as *Grand-*

daughter of Archdeacon Elgee of Wexford. The Archdeacon is one of the saints of the Wexford Calendar, and the people are always pleased to connect me with him. My father *was eldest son* of Archdeacon Elgee, and he was not a clergyman."

Jane Francesca Elgee was born in Wexford in 1826 of a Protestant and Conservative family. Her paternal grandfather, the Archdeacon referred to above, was a most distinguished man. He was a Rector of Wexford; and Lady Wilde used to tell an anecdote about him to illustrate his kindly character and the impulsive feelings of the Irish people. During the Revolution of 1798 a band of rebels had entered Wexford Church where the Archdeacon was celebrating the sacrament with a number of his parishioners. The clergyman was dragged from the altar, and was about to be put to death by the pikes of the infuriated Irish, when one of them, striking up the weapons which had already been turned upon his devoted breast, implored his comrades to spare a man who once had done an act of great kindness to his family. He related this act of charity—one of hundreds for which the Rector was famous—and spoke with such eloquence that not only did the rebels, who had been committing many acts of great cruelty in

the district, spare his life, but they also resolved that none of his belongings should be touched, and a guard was placed at the rectory to protect the lives and the property of all its dwellers.

Her mother was a Miss Kingsbury who was the grand-daughter of Dr Kingsbury, who in his day was president of the Irish College of Physicians, and the intimate friend of Dean Swift. His son, Dr Thomas Kingsbury, the father of Sarah Kingsbury, who was Lady Wilde's mother, was a Commissioner in Bankruptcy and the owner of the well-known mansion, Lisle House, in Dublin. Lady Wilde had many distinguished relations. One of her uncles was Sir Charles Ormsby, Bart., who was a member of the last Irish Parliament. She was first cousin to the Sir Robert M'Clure who was famous as an explorer, and who is best known as "the seeker of the N.-W. passage." Her only brother, Judge Elgee, was a distinguished member of the American bar. She was also a grand-niece of the famous writer, the Rev. Charles Maturin. Of this kinship Oscar Wilde was in his heart very proud. When he left prison it was from the hero of this Charles Maturin's most famous novel, "Melmoth the Wanderer," that he borrowed the name under which he was to drag out the remaining agony of his years. Possibly

what most endeared to him the memory of this great-grand-uncle was that the mighty Balzac, for whom his admiration was unlimited, had expressed his high approval of the famous novel. In his " L'Elixir de longue Vie," Balzac gazettes Oscar Wilde's great-uncle with Molière, with Goethe and with Byron, as one of the greatest geniuses of Europe. He refers as follows to Melmoth and to its author, Maturin :—

" Il fût en effet le type du Don Juan de Molière, du Faust de Goethe, du Manfred de Byron et du Melmoth de Maturin. Grandes images tracées par les plus grandes génies de l'Europe." One needs to know the estimation which Oscar Wilde held of Balzac as an artist and a thinker to understand with what gratification these lines of highest tribute to his kinsman must have filled him.

But besides Balzac there was another great intellect which had confessed to the power which Maturin and his hero had exercised over him. In W. M. Thackeray's " Goethe in his Old Age " we find the following reference to them :—

" I felt quite afraid before them, and recollect comparing them to the eyes of the hero of a certain romance called " Melmoth the Wanderer," which used to alarm us boys thirty years ago ; eyes of an individual who had made

a bargain with a certain person, and at an extreme old age retained those eyes in all their awful splendour."

Charles Baudelaire, the poet, for whom Oscar Wilde's admiration was so intense, wrote thus of Melmoth :—

" Celébre voyageur Melmoth, la grande création satanique du révérend Maturin. Quoi de plus grand, quoi de plus puissant relativement à la pauvre humanité que ce pâle et ennuyé Melmoth ? "

In the house in Merrion Square was a fine bust of Charles Maturin. It is either a cast of one executed at the request of Sir Walter Scott, and formerly preserved at Abbotsford, or from a mask impression taken after his death. Though, of course, the portrait of an older man (than when Melmoth was written) years seemed to have told very little on his face if we compare it with the strikingly youthful countenance that appears in the *New Monthly Magazine*.

In this Charles Maturin we find that mixture of genius and insanity which manifested it also in the lad who was brought up in reverent contemplation of his bust, and in whole-hearted admiration of his life and work. Kinsmen by affinity no less than kinsmen by consanguinity can transmit their qualities and defects to their

posterity; and there can be no doubt whatever that Oscar Wilde's nature was greatly moulded by the strong influence that Maturin exercised over his mother. This being an indisputable fact it becomes necessary to seek some further information on the subject of this strange and brilliant man, who so many years after his death was to stand sponsor to the most unhappy of his kinsmen. The best account of Charles Maturin as a man is to be found in the pages of that excellent biography of "Clarence Mangan, the Irish Poet," by R. J. O'Donoghue, to which reference has been made above. Mr O'Donoghue prefaces Mangan's description of Maturin with some comments of his own, and the whole passage may be quoted here. Particular attention may be requested to the account of Maturin's eccentricities of dress. They may explain much in Oscar's peculiarities in the same respect. Oscar Wilde was accused because of them of a vulgar desire for *réclame*, for self-advertisement. To Charles Maturin a more lenient age accorded his foibles, just as to Balzac was granted his monkish cowl, to Van Dyck his court array, and to Barbey d'Aurevilly his cloak of red samite.

The following is Mangan's description with O'Donoghue's prefatory remarks :—

"Towards the close of his life Mangan put on

record his impressions of this remarkable writer, Maturin, in whom Scott and Byron so thoroughly believed that the first offered to edit his works after his death, and the latter used all his influence successfully to get a hearing for his plays. Numerous stories are related of him. His genius was of the untamed, uncultivated kind. His works are those of a madman, glowing with burning eloquence and deep feeling, but full of absurdities and inconsistencies. His Irish tales, such as 'The Wild Irish Boys,' and 'The Milesian Chief,' are made almost unreadable by a vicious and ranting style. Whenever Maturin was engaged in literary work he used to place a wafer on his forehead to let those who entered his study know that he was not to be disturbed. Mangan had more than the prevailing admiration for the grotesqueness of Maturin's romances; their terrible and awe-inspiring nature impressed him profoundly. He felt a kind of fascination for this lonely man of genius, whom at one period he might have called in his own words,

"'The Only, the Lonely, the Earth's Companionless One?'

"He opens his sketch, which is very characteristic of his style, with the humorous rhyme:—

"'Maturin, Maturin, what a strange hat you're in?'

"'I saw Maturin but on three occasions, and on all these within two months of his death. I was then a mere boy; and when I assure the reader that I was strongly imbued with a belief in those doctrines of my church which seem (and only seem) to savour of what is theologically called "exclusiveness," he will appreciate the force of the impulse which urged me one morning to follow the author of Melmoth into the porch of St Peter's Church in Aungier Street, and hear him read the burial service. Maturin, however, did not read, he simply repeated; but with a grandeur of emphasis, and an impressive power of manner that chained me to the spot. His eyes, while he spoke, continually wandered from side to side, and at length rested on me, who reddened up to the roots of my hair at being even noticed by a man that ranked far higher in my estimation than Napoleon Bonaparte. I observed that, after having concluded the service, he whispered something to the clerk at his side, and then again looked steadfastly at me. If I had been the master of sceptres—of worlds—I would have given them all that moment to have been put in possession of his remark.

"'The second time I saw Maturin he had been just officiating, as on the former occasion,

at a funeral. He stalked along York Street with an abstracted, or rather distracted air, the white scarf and hat-band which he had received remaining still wreathed round his beautifully-shaped person, and exhibiting to the gaze of the amused and amazed pedestrians whom he almost literally encountered in his path, a boot upon one foot, and a shoe on the other. His long pale, melancholy, Don Quixote, out-of-the-world face would have inclined you to believe that Dante, Bajazet, and the Cid had risen together from their sepulchres and clubbed their features for the production of an effect. But Maturin's mind was only fractionally pourtrayed, so to speak, in his countenance. The great Irishman, like Hamlet, had that within him, which passed show, and escaped far and away beyond the possibility of expression by the clay lineament. He bore the "hunderscars" about him, but they were graven, not on his brow, but on his heart.

"'The third and last time that I beheld this marvellous man I remember well. It was some time before his death, on a balmy Autumn evening, in 1824. He slowly descended the steps of his own house, which, perhaps, some future Transatlantic biographer may thank me for informing him was at No. 42 York Street,[1]

[1] 41 is generally given as the number.

and took his way in the direction of Whitefriar Street, into Castle Street, and past the Royal Exchange into Dame Street, every second person staring at him and the extraordinary double-belted and treble-caped rug of an old garment—neither coat nor cloak—which enveloped his person. But here it was that I, who had tracked the footsteps of the man as his shadow, discovered that the feeling to which some individuals, rather over sharp and shrewd, had been pleased to ascribe this "affectation of singularity" had no existence in Maturin. For, instead of passing along Dame Street, where he would have been "the observed of all observers," he wended his way along the dark and forlorn locality of Dame Lane, and having reached the end of this not very classical thoroughfare, crossed over to Anglesea Street, where I lost sight of him. Perhaps he went into one of those bibliopolitan establishments wherewith that Paternoster Row of Dublin then abounded. I never saw him afterwards. . . . An inhabitant of one of the stars dropped upon our planet could hardly feel more bewildered than Maturin habitually felt in his consociation with the beings around him. He had no friend, companion, brother; he and the "Lonely Man of Shiraz" might have shaken hands and then—

parted. He—in his own dark way—understood many people ; but nobody understood him in any way.' "

Till the age of eighteen Francesca Elgee devoted herself entirely to study and reading. " Till my eighteenth year, I never wrote anything," she relates, " Then, one day, a volume of ' Ireland's Library,' issued from *The Nation* office by Mr Duffy, happened to come my way. I read it eagerly, and my patriotism was kindled." This volume was D'Alton Williams' book, " The Spirit of the Nation."

" Till then," says Lady Wilde, " I was quite indifferent to the National movement, and if I thought about it at all, probably had a bad opinion of its leaders. For my family was Protestant and Conservative, and there was no social intercourse between them and the Catholics and Nationalists. But once I had caught the National spirit, and all the literature of Irish songs and sufferings had an enthralling interest for me, then it was that I discovered that I could write poetry. In sending my verses to the editor of *The Nation* I dared not have my name published, so I signed them ' Speranza,' and my letters ' John Fenshaw Ellis,' instead of Jane Francesca Elgee."

Lady Wilde did *not* commence contributing to *The Nation* in 1844, as her biographers state. Her first contributions appeared in that journal in 1847. She was at that time living with her parents at 34 Leeson Street, which is in a quarter which is the Bayswater of Dublin. Her most famous poem was entitled "A Million a Decade." These contributions were for the most part published in a small type column which preceded the leading articles, and which appears to have been reserved for the efforts of amateur contributors, answers to correspondents, etc. Later on, however, that is to say in 1848, the honours of large type and prominent position were accorded to Speranza's poems and John Fenshaw Ellis's prose.

The girl's poetry has no particular merit either of expression or of thought, and, indeed, compared unfavourably with similar verse contributed by three other young women, whose Nationalism was of a more sincere type. These were known to the readers of *The Nation* as "Eva," "Mary," and "Thomasine." In his book, "My Life in Two Hemispheres," Sir Charles Gavan Duffy speaks of Speranza as the most gifted of the four, and, indeed, describes her as "a woman of genius." At the time that that book was written the former Nationalist editor,

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the Revolutionary of 1848, was living in opulence and luxury at the Villa Marguerite in Nice; decked with a British title and enriched with British gold. His sympathies would naturally tend rather to the one of the four women who like himself had abandoned the cause of Nationalism as *une erreur de jeunesse* when that cause had become a desperate one and a more profitable field for enthusiasm and activity offered itself. Among the martyrs of 1848, not among those who had the fortune to die then, but amongst the poor, broken old men, who are dragging out penurious existences in Dublin at this very day, men who never abandoned the cause, and who will die as ardent Nationalists as they were when Duffy and Speranza fired them into acts which sent them into confinement in British gaols, neither Speranza nor Duffy are remembered, as Nationalists, with great esteem. The Fenian editor, O'Leary, states that "Speranza" was of the four poetesses on *The Nation*, the one who was considered the least talented, that Eva was held to be the most sincere and the most gifted. "Eva" was Miss Eva Mary Kelly. "Mary" was Miss Ellen Downing. As to "Thomasine" her anonymity has not been pierced.

The great effect produced by Francesca Elgee

—it is to be noted as characteristic that she objected to the beautiful but unromantic name of Jane and never used it—was when she denounced herself in open court as the authoress of the famous article " Jacta est Alea," for the publishing of which the future Sir Charles Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, was being prosecuted.

This article appeared in No. 304 (printed 304) of *The Nation* which was published in Dublin under date of Saturday, 29th July 1848. *The Nation*, a weekly magazine journal of sixteen pages, of the size of the *Petit Journal*, which was published at sixpence, was then in its sixth volume. On the number preserved in the National Library of Ireland, in Dublin, there is written upon the front page in ink the following words : " This is The Suppressed Number. I believe it is the only copy which escaped, and that was not seized and carried to the Castle." This statement appears to be erroneous, for other copies are in existence, including one at the British Museum.

Lady Wilde's article was the second leader on the editorial page. The leading article, presumably written by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, was entitled " The Tocsin of Ireland," and is of that kind of politi-

cal, inflammatory writing which, once one has read it, is immediately forgotten. On this article Francesca Wilde's article follows. It is published anonymously, and fills rather more than two columns of the paper. As it is a document of essential interest in the archives of the family of the man with whom this volume deals it is reproduced *in extenso* in the following chapter, just as it was printed in *The Nation*, with the misprints italicised.

The 304th number of the revolutionary paper, edited by the future Sir Charles Gavan Duffy of the Villa Marguerite, Nice, contained much other matter which was calculated to incense the Castle. Amongst the topical articles which were published we find one on "Easy Lessons in Military Matters" by a veteran, which deals with such subjects as "Organisation," "Arms." Elsewhere in this journal the young Nationalist, who had been inflamed by the editorials of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, was instructed "How to Break Down a Bridge, or Blow One Up," "How to buy and try a Rifle"; and valuable topical information was also given on "Casting Bullets."

It may be added that Francesca Elgee had no dealings with the other people, apart from Duffy, who were active in agitation. In a

letter to Mr O'Donoghue, dated 13th November 1888, she writes : " I can give no information as to the workers of '48. Sir Charles Duffy would be the best authority. His address is the Villa Marguerite, Nice, France."

CHAPTER III

JACTA ALEA EST

Lady Wilde's Appeal to Arms—The Famous Article in *The Nation*—A Specimen of Revolutionary Literature—"A Hundred Thousand Muskets!"—Terrifying the Castle—"The Glorious Young Meagher!"—An Exact Transcript from the Copy in the National Library of Ireland.

"THE Irish Nation has at length decided. England has done us one good service at least. Her recent acts have taken away the last miserable pretext for passive submission. She has justified us before the world, and ennobled the timid, humble supplication of a degraded, insulted people, into the proud demand for independence by a resolved, prepared, and fearless Nation.

"Now, indeed, were the men of Ireland *cowards* if this moment for retribution, combat, and victory, were to pass by unemployed. It finds them slaves, but it would leave them infamous.

"Oh! for a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven, and the monumental barricades stretching across

each of our noble streets, made desolate by England—circling round that doomed Castle, made infamous by England, where the foreign tyrant has held his council of treason and iniquity against our people and our country for seven hundred years.

" Courage rises with danger, and heroism with resolve. Does not our breath come freer, each heart beat quicker in these rare and grand moments of human life, when all doubt, and wavering, and weakness are cast to the winds, and the soul rises majestic over each petty obstacle, each low, selfish consideration, and, flinging off the fetters of prejudice, bigotry, and egotism, bounds forward into the higher, diviner life of heroism and patriotism, defiant as a conqueror, devoted as a martyr, omnipotent as a Deity !

" We appeal to the whole Irish Nation—is there any man amongst us who wishes to take one further step on the base path of sufferance and slavery ? Is there one man that thinks that Ireland has not been sufficiently insulted, that Ireland has not been sufficiently degraded in her honour and her rights, to justify her now in fiercely turning upon her oppressor ? No ! a man so infamous cannot tread the earth ; or, if he does, the voice of the coward is stifled in

the clear, wild, ringing shout that leaps from hill to hill, that echoes from sea to sea, that peals from the lips of an uprisen Nation—'We must be free!'

"In the name then of your trampled, insulted, degraded country; in the name of all heroic virtues, of all that makes life illustrious or death divine; in the name of your starved, your exiled, your *dead*; by your martyrs in prison cells and felon chains; in the name of GOD and man; by the listening earth and the watching heaven, I call on you to make this aspiration of your souls a *deed*. Even as you read these weak words of a heart that yet palpitates with an enthusiasm as heroic as your own, and your breast heaves and your eyes grow dim with tears as the memory of Ireland's wrongs rushes upon your soul—even now lift up your right hand to heaven and swear—swear by your undying soul, by your hopes of immortality, never to lay down your arms, never to cease hostilities, till you regenerate and save this fallen land.

"Gather round the standard of your chiefs. Who dares to say he will not follow, when O'BRIEN leads? Or who amongst you is so abject that he will grovel in the squalid misery of his hut, or be content to be flung from the ditch side into the living tomb of the poorhouse,

rather than charge proudly like brave men and free men, with that glorious young MEAGHER at their head, upon the hired mercenaries of their enemies? One bold, one decisive move. One instant to take breath, and then a rising; a rush, a charge from north, south, east and west upon the English garrison, and *the land is ours*. Do your eyes flash, do your hearts throb at the prospect of having a *country?* For you have had no country. You have never felt the pride, the dignity, the majesty of independence. You could never lift up your head to heaven and glory in the name of Irishman, for all Europe read the brand of *slave* upon your brow.

"Oh! that my words could burn like molten metal through your veins, and light up this ancient heroic daring which would make each man of you a LEONIDAS—each battle-field a Marathon—each pass a Thermopylae. Courage! need I preach to Irishmen of courage? Is it so hard a thing then to die? Alas! do we not all die daily of broken hearts and shattered hopes, and tortures of mind and body that make life a weariness, and of weariness worse even than the tortures; for life is one long, slow agony of death.

"No! it cannot be death you fear; for you have braved the plague in the exile ship of the

Atlantic, and plague in the exile's home beyond it; and famine and ruin, and a slave's life, and a dog's death; and hundreds, thousands, a *million of* you have perished thus. Courage! You will not now belie those old traditions of humanity that tell of this divine God-gift within us. I have read of a Roman wife who stabbed herself before her husband's eyes to teach him how to die. These million deaths teach us as grand a lesson. To die for Ireland! Yes; have we not sworn it in a thousand passionate words by our poets and orators—in the grave resolves of councils, leagues and confederations. Now is the moment to test whether you value most freedom or life. Now is the moment to strike, and by striking save, and the day after the victory it will be time enough to count your dead.

"But we do not provoke this war. History will write of us—that Ireland endured wrongs unexampled by any depotism—sufferings unequalled by any people—her life-blood drained by a vampire host of foreign masters and officials—her honour insulted by a paid army of spies—her cries of despair stifled by the armed hand of legalised ruffianism—that her peasants starved while they reaped the corn for their foreign lords, because no man gave them bread—that

her pallid artisans pined and wasted, because no man gave them work—that her men of genius, the noblest and purest of her sons, were dragged to a felon's cell, lest the people might hear the voice of *truth*, and that in this horrible atrophy of all mental and physical powers, this stagnation of all existences, whoever dared to rise and demand wherefore it was that Ireland, made so beautiful by God, was made the plague spot of the universe by man—he was branded as a *felon*—imprisoned, robbed, tortured, chained, exiled, murdered. Thus history will write of us. And she will also write, that Ireland did not start from this horrid trance of suffering and despair until 30,000 swords were at her heart, and even then she did not rise for vengeance, only *prepared to resist*. No—we are not the aggressors—we do not provoke this terrible war—Even with six million hearts to aid us, and with all the chances of success in our favour we still offer terms to England. If she capitulates even now at the eleventh hour, and grants the moderate, the just demands of Ireland, our arms shall not be raised to sever the golden link that unites the two nations. And the chances of success *are* all with us. There is a God-like strength in a just cause—a desperate energy in men who are fighting in their own land for the possession

of that land. A glowing enthusiasm that scorns all danger when from success they can look onward to a future of unutterable glory and happiness for their country. Opposed to us are only a hired soldiery, and a paid police, who mere trained machines even as they are, yet must shudder (for they are men) at the horrible task of butchery, under the blasphemed name of duty to which England summons them. Brothers many of them are of this people they are called upon to murder—sons of the same soil—fellow-countrymen of those who are heroically, struggling to elevate their common country. Surely whatever humanity is left in them will shrink from being made the sad instruments of despotism and tyranny—they will blush to receive the purchase-money of England which hires them for the accursed and fratricidal work. Would a Sicilian have been found in the ranks of Naples? Would a Milanese have been detected in the fierce hordes of Austria? No; for the Sicilians prize honour, and the stately Milanese would strike the arm to the earth that would dare to offer them Austrian gold in payment for the blood of their own countrymen. And heaven forbid that in *Ireland* could be found a band of armed fratricides to fight against their own land for the flag of a foreign tyrant.

But if, indeed, interest or coercion should tempt them into so horrible and unnatural a position, pity, a thousand times pity for those brave officers who vaunt themselves on their honour. Pity for that brave soldiery whose Irish valour has made England illustrious, that they must stain honour, and fame, and profession, and their brave swords, by lending them to so infamous a cause. Ah! we need not tremble for a nation filled with a pure and holy enthusiasm, and fighting for all that human nature holds dear; but the masters of those hired mercenaries may well tremble for their cause, for the consciousness of eternal infamy will unnerve every arm that is raised to uphold it.

"If the government, then, do not come forward with honest, honourable and liberal concessions, let the war active and passive commence. *They* confide in the discipline of their troops—*we* in the righteousness of our cause. But not even a burning enthusiasm—which they have not—added to their discipline, could make a garrison of 30,000 men hold their ground against six millions. And one thing is certain—that if the people do not choose to fight the garrison, they may *starve* them. Adopt the Milan method—let no man sell to them. This passive warfare may be carried on in every

village in Ireland, while more active hostilities are proceeding through all the large towns and cities. But, to gain possession of the capital should be the grand object of all efforts. Let every line converge to this point. The Castle is the key-stone of English power; take it, destroy it, burn it—at any hazard become masters of it, and on the same ground from whence proceeded all those acts of insult and infamy which aroused the just retribution of a people's vengeance, establish a government in whom the people of all classes can place confidence.

"On this pedestal of fallen tyranny and corruption raise a structure of nobleness that will at once give security and prestige of time-honoured and trusted names to our revolution. For a people who rise to overthrow a despotism will establish no modification of it in its place. If they fight it is for absolute independence; and as the first step in a revolution should be to prevent the possibility of anarchy, the men elected to form this government ought at once to take the entire progress and organisation of the revolution under their protection and authority. It will be their duty to watch that no crime be suffered to stain the pure flag of Irish liberty. We must show to the world that

we are fitted to govern ourselves ; that we are, indeed, worthy to be a free nation, that the words union, liberty, country, have as sacred a meaning in our hearts and actions as they are holy on our lips ; that patriotism means not merely the wild irresistible force that crushed tyranny, but reconstruction, regeneration, heroism, sacrifice, sublimity ; that we have not alone to break the fetters of Ireland, but to raise her to a glorious elevation—defend her, liberate her, ennoble her, sanctify her.

" Nothing is wanting now to complete our regeneration, to ensure our success, but to cast out those vices which have disgraced our name among the nations. There are terrible traditions shadowing the word *Liberty* in Ireland. Let it be our task, men of this generation—descendants of martyrs, and sufferers, and heroes, to make it a glad evangel of happiness—a reign of truth over fictions and symbols—of intellect over prejudice and conventionalism—of humanity over tyranny and oppression. Irishmen ! this resurrection into a new life depends on you ; for we have all lain dead. Hate, distrust, oppression, disunion, selfishness, bigotry—these things are Death. We must crush all vices—annihilate all evil passions—trample on them, as a triumphant CHRIST with his foot upon the

serpent, and then the proud hallelujah of Freedom will rise to heaven from the lips of a pure, a virtuous, a regenerated, a God-blessed people ; and this fair land of ours, which now affrights the world with its misery, will be one grand temple, in which we shall all kneel as brothers—one holy, peaceful, loving fraternity—sons of one common country—children of one God—heirs together of those blessings purchased by our blood—a heritage of freedom, justice, independence, prosperity and glory ! "

CHAPTER IV

Lady Wilde's Nationalism—The Influence of a Single Book—Oscar Wilde's Similar Claim—Meeting between Mr Duffy and Mr Ellis—Speranza's Fine Gesture—Her Admiration for Mr Duffy—Pen-Portraits of Lady Wilde at Different Periods—How she clung to Youth—Her Fondness for Society—Eccentricities of Dress—Her Son's Resemblance to her—Her Literary Labours—A Letter to Mr O'Donoghue—Brief Summary of Conclusions.

It was probably rather by the other contents of No. 304 of *The Nation* than by the article "Jacta Alea Est," that Dublin Castle was alarmed, and deemed it advisable to order the confiscation of this number, the suppression of the journal, and the arrest and arraignment of Mr (afterwards Sir Charles) Duffy. It would be difficult otherwise to understand these extreme measures, for the article is exactly of that class of revolutionary literature which is usually read with gratification by those in power. There is no mischief to be feared from rhapsodical generalities. On the other hand, the papers giving practical advice to the malcontents on subjects so subversive as the destruction of bridges and the manipulation of fire-arms certainly warranted action. However that may be,

it has generally been conceded to Lady Wilde that with her pen she made the Castle tremble : she stepped at once to the front as an ardent Nationalist and patriot ; and of none of her writings were her sons perhaps more proud than of the article which is given in the preceding chapter. Her Nationalism was, of course, not sincere. It could not be. She had been trained as a Protestant and a Conservative. Her relations, those of whom she was most proud, were beneficed dignitaries under the British Crown, just as later her husband was to become by appointment, warrant and viceregal favour, a dependent of British Royal favour, and she herself during the last six years of her life was to draw from the Civil List a small alimony of imperial silver. No patriotism, no national spirit can be fired in man or woman by the perusal of a single book ; and of D'Alton Williams' work it may be said that it inspires nothing but *ennui*. It is not in this way that the Joans of Arc are driven forth to battle. It is, of course, probable that it was the perusal of this book which suggested to the young woman that evils existed, that here was a field for her literary activity, and that her spasmodic Nationalism was the result. It showed the young woman's practical sense that this National-

ism was only spasmodic; for as we look back on the period of more than half-a-century which has elapsed since she first manifested its spirit, we observe that it has not been the worldly wise amongst Irish men and women who have espoused the National cause. For the true Nationalist there have been the galleys, the rifle, the scaffold, and, as a set-off from the derision of the worldly wise, the mute gratitude of the voiceless people and a martyr's crown. Lady Wilde's *crassa Minerva* did not allow her to cling to a cause of which she was so soon to discover that it was a hopeless one. Her Nationalism, if whim it were, she readily abandoned, and she did not go through life explaining that the perusal of a single book had entirely changed the current of her thoughts, her purposes and aims. This was one of the mistakes that was made by her son, Oscar. It pleased him to say that some single book, which had come into his hands when he was a young man, had thus revolutionised his entire mentality; and he attributed to the influence of this book all the things that seemed to have been prompted in him by what was not common-sense. In a passage in "The Picture of Dorian Gray," he describes how the hero of that novel fell under the influence of a single book. "It was the

strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that, in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. . . . It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages, and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains, and movements, elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and the creeping shadows. . . . For years Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book."

This is, of course, silliness. Yet Oscar Wilde used to make the same silly, self-deceiving statement about himself, and attributed to some "poisonous book" which he had once read many of the abnormalities of his conduct. In this, no doubt, he was prompted by the story which he had heard at home as a boy, how the mother whom he so admired and so loved had been prompted to action and to an entire renunciation of early principles and creeds by the reading of a single book. The fact that the influence of this book

had been of the briefest was entirely overlooked.

The story of the first meeting between the editor of *The Nation* and " John Fenshaw Ellis " is well-known. It may, however, be repeated here, with the addition of Lady Wilde's own account of how it was that having long refused to let Mr Duffy call upon her she finally gave him permission to do so.

" After a while," she relates, " Mr Duffy wished me to call at the office, and again ' Mr Ellis ' had to excuse himself from doing it. One day my nurse came into my room and found *The Nation* on my table. Then she accused me of contributing to it, declaring the while that such a seditious paper was fit only for the fire. The secret being out in my own family there was no longer much motive for concealment, and I gave my editor permission to call upon me. Even then, as Sir Charles Duffy has since told me he scarcely knew who ' Speranza ' might be, and great was his surprise, therefore, when I stepped out from an inner room."

Sir Charles Duffy relates in his " Young Ireland " that " Mr Ellis, whom he had frequently requested to call upon him at *The Nation* office, pleaded that there were difficulties which rendered this course inpracticable. Finally, Mr

Ellis asked the editor to call at 34 Leeson Street. Going to the house Duffy states that he was met by Sir George Smith, publisher to Dublin University, who presented him to Miss Jane Francesca Elgee, whom he describes as a tall girl, whose stately carriage and figure, flashing brown eyes, and features cast in an heroic mould seemed fit for the genius of poetry or the spirit of the revolution."

After the suppression of *The Nation*, most of the leaders of the revolutionary movement were transported for treason-felony; while Mr (afterwards Sir Charles) Duffy was put on trial for sedition. The attorney-general quoted from the article "Jacta Alea Est" in support of the charge, and declared that that article was sufficient to convict the prisoner at the bar. "I am the culprit, if culprit there be," cried a voice from the gallery of the court, and a young woman rose to her feet. It was Jane Francesca Elgee who by this fine gesture endeared herself for ever to the Irish Nation. The result was to trouble the minds of the jury; they disagreed; and the editor of *The Nation* was discharged to pursue his career more profitably to himself in another hemisphere.

Speranza's admiration for this man appears to have been very great. The following is one

of the many letters she wrote to him after her identity had been disclosed.

"34 Leeson Street, *Monday*.

"My dear Sir,—I return with many thanks the volume of Cromwell which has been travelling about with me for the last four months, and shall feel obliged for the two others when you are quite at leisure, though not even Carlyle can make this soulless iconoclast interesting. It is the only work of Carlyle's I have met with in which my heart does not go along with his words.

"I cannot forbear telling you, now the pen is in my hand, how deeply impressed I felt by your opening lecture to your club. It was the sublimest teaching, and the style so simple from its very sublimity—it seemed as if truth passed directly from your heart to ours, without the aid of any medium—at least I felt that everywhere the *thoughts* struck you, nowhere the words, and this in my opinion is the perfection of composition. It is soul speaking to soul. I never felt the *dignity* of your cause so much as then—to promote it any way seemed an object that would ennoble a life. Truly, we cannot despair when God sends us such teachers. But you will wish me away for another four happy

months if I write you such long notes. So I shall conclude with kind compliments to Mrs Duffy, and remain, yours very sincerely,

" FRANCESCA ELGEE.

" I only *read* your lecture—some time or other I would like to *hear* you."

A year or two before she died in the dismal house in Oakley Street, Chelsea, which her son William and his family shared with her, and of which her son Oscar paid the rent, Lady Wilde said to a young Irish poet :

" I must go and live up Primrose Hill; I was an eagle in my youth."

By various writers various pictures have been given of this extraordinary woman at various periods in her life. There are many people still living in Dublin who remember No. 1 Merrion Square when it was *the* salon of the capital. On reception nights the crush of people in the drawing-rooms upstairs used to be so great that it was a familiar spectacle that of Lady Wilde elbowing her way through the crush and crying out, " How ever am I to get through all these people."

As her beauty departed from her with the advance of years, Lady Wilde used to darken the rooms in which visitors saw her. Stories

got about that the purpose of this was to conceal some disfiguring mark on her face; but the fact was merely that she did not wish people to notice the difference that Time had wrought on the features and complexion of the beautiful "Speranza" of 1848. A Miss Corkran gives the following account of a call she paid to Lady Wilde at No. 1 Merrion Square, an account which is not characterised by much sympathy or kindness :—

"I called at Merrion Square late in the afternoon, for Lady Wilde never received anyone until 5 P.M., as she hated strong lights; the shutters were closed, and the lamps had pink shades, though it was full daylight. A very tall woman—she looked over six feet high—she wore that day a long crimson silk gown which swept the floor. The skirt was voluminous, underneath there must have been two crinolines, for when she walked there was a peculiar swaying, swelling movement, like that of a vessel at sea, with the sails filled with wind. Over the crimson silk were flounces of Limerick lace, and round what had been a waist an Oriental scarf embroidered with gold was twisted. The long, massive, handsome face was plastered with powder. Over her blue-black, glossy hair was a gilt crown of laurels. Her

throat was bare, so were her arms, but they were covered with quaint jewellery. On her broad chest was fastened a series of large miniature brooches, evidently family portraits . . . this gave her the appearance of a walking family mausolem. She wore white kid gloves, held a scent-bottle, a lace handkerchief, and a fan. Lady Wilde reminded me of a tragedy queen at a suburban theatre."

Lady Wilde was very popular in Dublin with the people. It is related that "they used to cheer her when she was on her way to the drawing-rooms at the Castle"; just because some years previously she had urged a hundred thousand musketeers to march upon that very Castle, and to wipe it off the face of Ireland.

In the story of "An Unhappy Friendship" we find the following reference to Lady Wilde at home in her son William's house in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in 1883:—

"During the first days of my stay there Oscar Wilde took me to a reception at his mother's house. . . . I was presented as having a volume of poems in the press, and was graciously received. Later on, as I was standing talking to Anna Kingsford, Lady Wilde, holding some primroses in her hand, crossed the drawing-room, repeating; 'Flowers for the poet! Flowers

for the poet!' It was for me that they were intended, for she came up to me and decorated my coat with the posy."

Lady Wilde was at that time about fifty-seven years of age. She had by then entirely renounced her natural, feminine, and pathetic endeavours to conceal the march of Time. Her receptions were in broad daylight, the deceptive flambeaux with their pink-shades had been put away till nightfall. She was a strikingly handsome woman. *C'était quelqu'un.* Her voice had a peculiar power and a peculiar charm. She seemed happy; poverty and disaster had not yet come upon her; her sons were both full of promise and achievement. There were to be noticed few of the peculiarities of dress to which Miss Corkran calls attention. Yet her black silk bodice was as covered with large old-fashioned medallions as is with orders on Garter nights the *brochette* of the diplomat whose back has been supple all through life.

Her clinging to youth, her efforts to mask the advance of age, her horror for the stigmata of physical decay were all characteristics which she transmitted to her son Oscar. His books are full of rhapsodical eulogies of youth; he never tires of satirising and condemning maturity and old age. In the same way her fondness for

large, showy and curious articles of jewellery, which, especially amongst the Jews, is a trait which often characterises men and women of genius, was directly transmitted to this son.

The gradual descent of this woman in the social scale is one of the pathetic stories of literary history. This ex-revolutionary had for the society of the wealthy, the titled, the distinguished, the same pronounced liking which was noticed in Oscar Wilde also. As long as it was possible for her to do so, indeed until at last broken down by disappointment and illness she finally took to the bed where she breathed her last after an agony of many months, she held her drawing-rooms. But the imperial days of Merrion Square, even the semi-aristocratic reunions of Park Street, were of the past. In the dingy house in Oakley Street, fit scene for the unspeakable tragedies that Time held in its lap, the gatherings were the shabby-genteel burlesque of a literary salon. Miss Hamilton has given a picture of such a reception in this house, which shows us Lady Wilde just before she resigned herself to desolation and solitude :—

"I had an invitation," writes Miss Hamilton, "to her Saturday 'At Homes,' and on a dull, muggy December day, I reached the house. The hour on the card said, 'From five to seven,'

and it was past five when I knocked at the door. The bell was broken. The narrow hall was heaped with cloaks, waterproofs, and umbrellas, and from the door—for the reception-rooms were on the ground-floor—came a confusing buzz of voices. Anglo-Irish and American, Irish literary people, to say nothing of a sprinkling of brutal Saxons, were crowded together as thickly as sardines in a box. Red-shaded lamps were on the mantelpiece, red curtains, veiled doors and windows; and through this darkness visible I looked vainly for the hostess. Where was she? Where was Lady Wilde? Then I saw her—a tall woman, slightly bent with rheumatism, fantastically dressed in a trained black and white checkered silk gown; from her head floated long, white tulle streamers, mixed with ends of scarlet ribbon. What glorious dark eyes she had! Even then, and she was over sixty, she was a strikingly handsome woman. Though I was a perfect stranger to her, she at once made me welcome, and introduced me to someone she thought I would like to know. She had the *art de faire un salon*. If anyone was discovered sitting in a corner unnoticed, Lady Wilde was sure to bring up someone to be introduced, and she never failed to speak a few happy words, which made the

stranger feel at home. She generally prefaced her introductions with some remarks such as 'Mr A., who has written a delightful poem,' or Miss B., who is on the staff of 'The Snap-dragon,' or 'Mrs C., whose new novel everyone is talking about.' As to her own talk it was remarkably original, sometimes daring, and always interesting. Her talent for talk was infectious; everyone talked their best. There was tea in the back room, but no one seemed to care about eating and drinking. Some forms of journalism had no attraction for her. 'I can't write,' I heard her say, 'about such things as Mrs Green looked very well in black, and Mrs Black looked very well in green.'"

Miss Hamilton also relates the following characteristic anecdote about Lady Wilde.

"When I was at Oakley Street one day, I asked what time it was, as I wanted to catch a train.

"'Does anyone here,' asked Lady Wilde, with one of her lofty glances, 'know what time it is? We never know in this house about Time.'

"This," adds Miss Hamilton, "it seems to me, was a key to the way in which Lady Wilde looked at things. Trifles, everyday trifles, she considered quite beneath her; and yet trifles

make up the sum of human life. She had a horror of the 'miasma of the commonplace'; her eyes were fixed on ideals, on heroes, ancient and modern—and thus she missed much that was lying near her, 'close to her feet,' in her fervent admiration of the dim, the distant and the unapproachable."

The great caricaturist Dickens, whose notice few of his distinguished contemporaries escaped, seems to have studied some of Lady Wilde's peculiarities from afar, and the results of his observations may be found here and there in his books.

After her marriage "Speranza," abandoning poetry and the Young Ireland Movement of which she had sung :—

"We stand in the light of a dawning day
With its glory creation flushing;
And the life-currents up from the pris'ning clay,
Through the world's great heart are rushing.
While from peak to peak of the spirit land
A voice unto voice is calling:
'The night is over, the day is at hand,
And the fetters of earth are falling!'"

turned to prose.

In a letter dated from Oakley Street in '88 she writes to Mr D. J. O'Donoghue the following account of her literary and journalistic labours.

"DEAR SIR,

"In answer to the inquiries contained in your note I have to state that I contributed to many periodicals in London, amongst others to *The University Magazine, Tinsley's Magazine, The Burlington Magazine, The Woman's World, The Queen, The Lady's Pictorial, The Pall Mall Gazette,* and others whose names I cannot now recall. The more important writings of recent years are:—'Driftwood from Scandinavia' (Bentley, 1 vol. 1867); 'Ancient Irish Legends' (Ward and Downey, 2 vols. 1887); *The American Irish,* a political pamphlet, Dublin.

"But I have recently devoted myself more to literature than to politics. Nationality was certainly the first awakener of any mental power of genius within me, and the strongest sentiments of my intellectual life, but the present state of Irish affairs requires the strong guiding hand of men, there is no place any more for the more passionate aspirations of a woman's nature."

In another letter to Mr O'Donoghue she states: "Also I did *not* write in 1844 for *The Nation,* nor did I write 'The Chosen Leader.'"

The following is a list of the best known among the books of Lady Wilde—"Poems by

'Speranza,'" 1871; "Driftwood from Scandinavia," 1884; "Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland," (2 vols. 1887); "Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland," 1890; "Social Studies," 1893.

"She further," wrote *The Times* biographer of her after her death, "translated several French and German works, and was the author of 'Ugo Bassi,' a tale of the Italian Revolution in verse, published in 1857; 'The First Temptation,' 1863; 'The Glacier Land,' adapted from Dumas; 'The Wanderer and his Home,' adapted from Lamartine; and 'Pictures from the First French Revolution,' 1865-1875. In 1880 she issued the concluding portion of her husband's 'Memoir of Béranger.'"

She was never photographed; and the only portraits which survive are engravings from pictures.

Many of her writings were never published. Her poems are still read; and that there is still a demand for her two books, "Ancient Cures," and "Ancient Legends," is shown by the fact that these two books were included in the recently-issued catalogue of a large new book-lending enterprise.

Both these books, however, according to Lady Wilde's own statement, were largely taken

from materials collected by, or for her husband. "He would employ very many people," she related once, "schoolmasters in the villages chiefly, who could speak both Irish and English, to investigate and collect all the local traditions, superstitions, etc., of the peasantry. When he died a great amount of material had been collected, much of which I have published in the last year or so in the volumes entitled 'Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland,' and 'Ancient Legends of Ireland.' Sir William had a passion for such research; and in recognition of his services the Royal Irish Academy gave him its gold medal."

This detailed investigation into the immediate parentage and remoter affinities and relationships of Oscar Wilde has afforded us many data which will go towards enabling the student of his life to understand some points in his complex character as well as a few of his peculiarities. Of these some came to him by direct inheritance, in his blood, so to say; others were the result of that instinctive imitation of their parents and such of their kinsfolk as are held up as examples for their reverence and admiration which all children practise. Psychological influences have also been indicated.

It may be well in conclusion to sum up under

their different headings certain characteristics of his which we are now able to trace back to their source. Under "direct inheritance," or "transmission by blood," may, perhaps, be classed his literary capacity, his gifts of poetry, languages, of ready mastery of difficult studies, his love of the beautiful, the sound common-sense of his normal periods, his family and personal pride, and his moral courage in the face of danger, but also an indifference to the dangers of alcoholism, an aversion from failure, physical, social and mental, an exaggerated esteem, on the other hand, for wealth, titles and social success, a tolerance for moral laxness.

The instinctive imitation of childhood may explain his love for eccentricity in dress, his professions of an adoration for youth and a hatred for old age, his claim that the perusal of a single book entirely revolutionised his mentality.

This rough classification is only advanced tentatively, as a suggestion, and with all due awe for the complex mysteries of the human soul. The psychology of an Oscar Wilde is not to be resolved into elemental factors by human intelligence. But the few data arrived at may render the problem of that psychology less bewildering, and at the same time, because of

the very dimness of the light which they cast, impress us with the magnitude and the obscurity of the problem. Now it is not right or lawful for man to judge or to condemn that which he cannot understand. When God withholds His light either on the acts or on the motives of a fellow man it means nothing more than this, that He reserves the judging of that man's acts and thoughts for His own supreme tribunal.

CHAPTER V

Oscar Wilde's Christening—The Selection of his Names—His Later Dislike of them—No. 1 Merrion Square—The Merrion Square Jarvey—Oscar Wilde and the Cab-drivers—Oscar and his Brother—Oscar's Sister—His Poem on her Death—His Early Upbringing—His Precocity—His Knowledge of French—His Home-Life—An Artificial Atmosphere—Dangerous Environment—Sir William Wilde's Love of Nature—Oscar's Abhorrence from Nature—His Enunciations on the Subject—Oscar Wilde's Writings, Sincere, not Paradoxical.

Such was the parentage of the child who was born on 16th October 1854, at No. 1 Merrion Square, in the mournful city of Dublin ; whose advent, because he was a boy, was a disappointment to his mother, and who for a long time after his birth was treated as a girl, talked to as a girl, dressed as a girl. His father did not share his wife's caprice, and for his second son selected names of singular virility. These names were so chosen as to proclaim to the world the lad's close association by blood with the history of Ireland. Oscar is good Celtic, it is a name closely connected with Irish legend and record. And here another negation is necessary. Oscar Wilde was not the god-son of the Duke of

Ostergötland, although Speranza allowed it to be understood that it had been after this princely friend of the family that the boy was called. People living in Dublin who remember the christening and all the circumstances connected with that ceremony have stated that at the time of Oscar's birth the Wildes were not acquainted with the gentleman who is now the King of Sweden. The myth was one of those *Schwaermereien* on the part of Lady Wilde, to which reference has already been made. It is certain that before Oscar's birth the personality of the poet-prince must have greatly occupied Speranza's thoughts for the personal resemblance between Oscar Wilde and the King of Sweden was one which struck everyone who knew the two men. More particularly was this resemblance a striking one between the prince as a student at Upsala and Oscar Wilde as a student at Oxford. On page 39 of Dr Josef Linck's biography of "King Oscar" ("Konung Oscar," Adolf Bonnier, Stockholm) there appeared a portrait of the young duke, which vividly reminds one of Oscar Wilde at the same age. However, it appears to be the fact that the child's name was chosen by his father, who wanted him to have a good ancient Irish name. For the same reason he also caused his son to

Photo by Elliot & Fry.

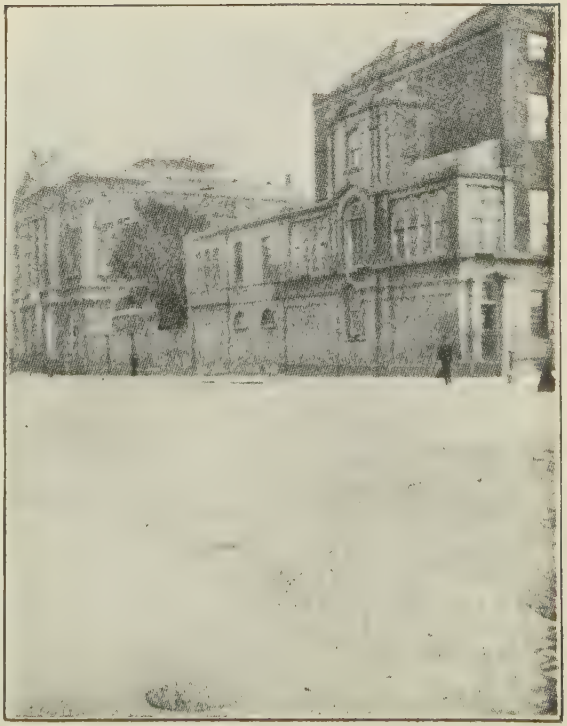
W. G. WILLS, PAINTER AND DRAMATIST. COUSIN TO [illegible].

be christened Fingal and O'Flaherty; the latter from those "wild O'Flahertys" from whom Cromwell's soldiers in an addendum to the Litany prayed God to deliver them. At the same time the additional name of Wills was bestowed upon the boy. The motive of this selection was the same. It was to affirm his Irish nationality. The Wills family were wealthy county people who had been settled for over three hundred years in Ireland. It was a General Wills of this family, who, with General Carpenter, crushed the legitimate hopes of the loyal party at the Battle of the Boyne. With this family the Wildes were closely connected, and in a near degree Oscar Wilde was cousin to that gifted man, W. G. Wills, the dramatist, painter and poet. On the two cousins the wonderful of dramaturgy had descended together with an allied strain of eccentricity, which, however, differed in its developments in the two favoured yet unhappy kinsmen.

The second son of William Wilde by his marriage to Jane Francesca Elgee was accordingly christened, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde. In his youth and early manhood he was proud of these sounding patronymics. Later on he discarded the use of them. They irritated him. To refer to them was to pro-

voke his great anger. They classified him; they labelled him; they wrote him down as *de son village;* and this was intolerable to him, to his cosmopolitan sense, to his disdain for partisanships, politics and protestations. He had a strong aversion from what was local in interest, from what was *outré* and self-assertive; and in all these ways his Irish Christian names offended his taste. For the rest Oscar Wilde never willingly placed himself on the losing side in any division of men. Irishmen and Irish matters have always been as unpopular in the London society to which he aspired, as they are in lower spheres of the Anglo-Saxon Mob; and although Oscar Wilde never denied his nationality he took particular care not to let it transpire. In some circles in Dublin it is held that he was an ardent Irish patriot, that the mantle that Speranza wore in '48 had descended upon his broad shoulders, that it was this very pride as an Irishman which prevented him from fleeing from a British Court of Justice when the opportunity offered itself to him so to do. If this was so he was able to dissimulate here also with astonishing skill.

It was amongst luxurious surroundings that the child was reared. His father's house is one of the best houses in the best part of Dublin—



and good houses in the Irish capital are very good indeed. They are mute witnesses, as are also the fine broad streets to-day, of former opulence and splendour. There are few houses in London or other big English cities which can compare in comfort, amplitude, elegance and decoration with a very large number of the Dublin bourgeois palaces. No. 1 Merrion Square, which is a corner house, is situated in one of the pleasantest and most convenient parts of the town. From the front the windows overlook the Merrion Square Gardens ; there is a large garden at the back, and on the right is Lincoln Place. The house, which is now occupied by a dentist, is painted red on the Lincoln Place front, and the windows which look out on this side are of an Oriental style of architecture. It is a big, solid, substantial bourgeois house which makes some pretensions to originality and artisticness. It looks the ideal residence for a successful professional man who stands well at court, but it hardly strikes one as the fit dwelling-place for a revolutionary poetess, or as the birthplace of a man of genius who over shifting, lifting deeps and by circuitous routes was to come to a death-bed so forlorn and sombre. No tablet yet records the fact that in this house was born the author of " The Soul of Man," or of " De Profundis " ;

but on the tablets of the people's memory that record is engraved. Just opposite the house, at the corner of the gardens, is a cab-stand, and amongst the drivers is an elderly man who, when he sees any stranger looking up at No. 1 Merrion Square, touches his hat and says that his honour is no doubt looking at the house where "Sir Oscar Wilde" was born. The stranger may answer that he did not know that the poet had been knighted also, and then the jarvey says that "Sure and he was," that he was a great poet besides, and that as a lad, he had often driven the gentleman. He speaks of it with pride, as a thing to be remembered, and he has nothing but good things to say of the young man who was kind and genial, and who paid handsomely for each "set-down." Oscar Wilde was always a good friend to cab-drivers. At the time of his trial he was known as "one of the best riders in Chelsea" amongst the cabmen. He must, in his opulent days, have spent many hundred pounds a year in cabs. At one period he used to take a cab by the day, and the first address that he used to give to the driver was the Burlington Arcade where there was a florist's shop, where every day he fetched for himself a buttonhole flower costing half-a-guinea, and another costing half-a-crown for his

cabman for the day. The Dublin cabman does not recollect that his young patron had any partiality for buttonhole flowers, but he remembers that even in those days, Oscar Wilde would not drive in a cab which was drawn by a white horse, as he considered this most unlucky. For the rest, he speaks of the young man, as of all the Wilde family, with respect and regret. "It was a sad day," he says, "when they went across the water."

As children the brothers William and Oscar were great friends; and Oscar Wilde in after life frequently spoke of their mutual attachment. "I had a toy bear," he once related, "of which I was very fond indeed, so fond that I used to take it to bed with me, and I thought that nothing could make me more unhappy than to lose my bear. Well, one day Willy asked me for it; and I was so fond of Willy that I gave it to him, I remember, without a pang. Afterwards, however, the enormity of the sacrifice I had made impressed itself upon me. I considered that such an act merited the greatest gratitude and love in return, and whenever Willy crossed me in any way I used to say: "Willy, you don't deserve my bear. Give me back my bear." And for years afterwards, after we had grown up, whenever we had a slight quarrel, I used to

say the same: "Willy, you don't deserve my bear. You must give me back my bear." He used to laugh at this recollection.

A third child was born to Lady Wilde, the daughter she had longed for. "She was like a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home," Oscar Wilde used to say of this sister. She did not live to reach womanhood; her loss was the greatest grief that Lady Wilde knew until. . . . One of Oscar Wilde's most beautiful poems, a Requiescat, which appears in his first volume of poems, is dedicated to the girl's memory. He writes of her:—

"She hardly knew
She was a woman,
So softly she grew."

There is one verse which renders a thought which must have come to all who mourn the dead:—

"Coffinboard, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast.
I vex my heart alone;
She is at rest."

Already as a very small boy Oscar gave proof of great cleverness. A great novelist of Irish birth relates how as a boy he accompanied his mother to call on Lady Wilde, who was just then staying at a country house on the borders

of Mayo and Galway, where Sir William Wilde had an estate. The caller asked Lady Wilde about the boys, and she answered : " Willy is all right, but Oscar is wonderful, wonderful. He can do anything." He was then nine years of age. In an article which Ernest La Jeunesse wrote about him after his death in Paris, the French critic referring to Wilde's wonderful knowledge and capacity said : " Il savait tout." Indeed, few men have so impressed their contemporaries with the feeling of omniscience.

In a biographical notice of Oscar Wilde, which appeared in 1891, is the following passage, referring to his early education.

" The son of two remarkable people, Mr Wilde had a remarkable upbringing. From his earliest childhood his principal companions were his father and mother and their friends. Now wandering about Ireland with the former in quest of archæological treasures, now listening in Lady Wilde's salon to the wit and thought of Ireland, the boy, before his eighth year had learnt the ways to ' the shores of old romance.' had seen all the apples plucked from the tree of knowledge, and had gazed with wondering eyes into ' the younger day.' This upbringing suited his idiosyncrasy ; indeed, with his temperament it is impossible to conceive what else could

have been done with him. He had, of course, tutors, and the run of a library containing the best literature, and went to a Royal school ; but it was at his father's dinner-table and in his mother's drawing-room that the best of his early education was obtained. Another experience, unusual to boyhood, had a powerful formative influence. He travelled much in France and Germany, becoming acquainted with the works of Heine and Goethe, but more especially with French literature and the French temperament. It was in France, at an age when other boys are grinding at grammar or cricket, that Oscar Wilde began to realise in some measure what he was. There he found himself for the first time in a wholly congenial environment. The English temperament—there are those who deny that such a thing exists—'like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh' responds indifferently to the æsthetic. In France Mr Wilde found everywhere exquisite susceptibility to beauty, and found also that he himself, an Irish Celt, possessed this susceptibility in all its intensity. French and Greek literature were the two earliest passions of his artistic life."

That he was familiar with German literature as a boy is not the case, and it is also doubtful

if the French environment revealed to the lad anything within himself of which he was not aware. There is no special susceptibility to beauty in France ; indeed, in few countries is more profound indifference displayed by the great mass of the people to the wonderful natural and artistic beauty with which the country is endowed. In Oscar Wilde's youth the very beauties which he was afterwards to celebrate in periods so eloquent were the derision of the majority. As a young man Oscar Wilde used to echo the foolish contempt of Lamartine which was the fashionable attitude of the *cognoscenti* in France in his boyhood. Lamartine, expounded by him, appeared a French Martin Tupper. And this is but an instance. His visits to France seemed to have laid the foundations of that great knowledge of the French language which he displayed in the writing of "Salomé." As to the writing and language of this play, the best French critics are unanimous in expressing their wonder that any foreigner could have acquired such a mastery of the French language, its beauties and intricacies. But as Ernest La Jeunesse has said : "Il savait tout." French was so familiar to him that, as he used to say, "he often thought in French." As a preparation for a

literary career in England this was not a good thing. The most successful writer knows only the tongue in which he writes. Linguistic attainment spoils the mother-language for the unilingual reader. The average Englishman cannot "follow" the writer who at times thinks in a tongue which is not his own. He revolts against similes, deductions, points of view which are not English. The man whose books translate well into foreign languages is not likely to be very highly appreciated in his own country. That is why, perhaps, it has been said that posterity begins at the frontier. There are exceptions of course. Gerard de Nerval's translation of Goethe's "Faust" was such a beautiful work that Goethe himself wrote to the French poet to compliment him on the authorship of the French "Faust." But "Faust" is in itself an exception. It is what the Germans call a "Weltstueck," a term, by the way, which they have also applied to "Salomé." Shakespeare reads badly in foreign translations even where the son of Hugo, under Victor Hugo's guidance, writes the version. Dickens never appealed to foreign nations in any degree equivalently to his wonderful influence on his countrymen.

It was an artificial atmosphere in which the

lad, Oscar, was reared. It is wonderful that he escaped that taint of precocity for which the English dictionary has another and a less euphonious term. It is more wonderful still that until his inherent madness broke out he escaped the taint of moral laxness which infected the air of his father's house. Here high thinking did not go hand in hand with plain living. The house was a hospitable one ; it was a house of opulence and carouse ; of late suppers and deep drinking ; of careless talk and example. His father's gallantries were the talk of Dublin. Even his mother, although a woman of spotless life and honour, had a loose way of talking which might have been full of danger to her sons. A saying of hers is still remembered in Dublin, which gives an echo of the way in which her attitude of revolt against the accepted and the commonplace prompted her to mischievous talk. " There has never been a woman yet in this world who wouldn't have given the top off the milkjug to some man if she had met the right one." The mother's salon, the father's supper-table were frequented by boozy and boisterous Bohemians, than whom no city more than Dublin furnishes stranger specimens. How free was the conversation which went on there in the presence of the two lads may be

gathered from a remark which Oscar Wilde once made to a fellow-undergraduate at Trinity College. "Come home with me," he said, "I want to introduce you to my mother. We have founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue." This statement, of course, partook of the nature of those remarks as to which a Prefect of Police in Paris once asked Charles Baudelaire, the poet, why a man of his genius often spoke in so foolish a way. "Pour étonner les sots," answered Baudelaire. "It was to astonish fools," without any doubt, that Oscar Wilde so spoke on that occasion, for there was no cleaner-lived young man than he. But his words show the prevailing moral atmosphere at home, and the dangers to which he was exposed. And no doubt also that having been exposed all through his youth to the contagion of immorality his powers of resistance against moral disease had been so weakened that when the attack came he had not the strength to overcome it. There is a great analogy between physical and mental diseases. This record should teach a lesson to parents which they would do well to lay to heart.

By his father as a lad he was taught to admire the beauties of Nature, but it did not appear in after life that he shared Sir William's en-

thusiasm. Though he wrote much and well about flowers and birds and the beauties of the land under the moving seasons, he used to describe the country as "rather tedious"; and to the end remained a dweller in cities. Atmospheric effects, the planets and the stars, the lights on land and sea, though he recognised their utility for poetical description, certainly never aroused emotions within him. Of Sir William, on the other hand, it is related that one night after everybody had retired to rest in the house which he owned at Howth, at the seaside near Dublin, a terrific storm having broken out overhead, he dragged a reluctant guest from his bed and up to the top of the house, there to admire with him the wonderful effects of the lightning flashes over the sea. "He kept me there for nearly an hour," related this guest afterwards, "and showed the greatest enthusiasm for the spectacle. I was far from sharing his excitement. It was drenching wet, and we were both lightly clad. Yet he kept appealing to me to join him in saying that it was the most wonderful night that I had ever spent." Oscar held that the monotony of life spent amidst rustic surroundings was fatal to artistic production. "One can only write in cities," he wrote in a letter to one of his friends,

" the country hanging on one walls in the grey mists of Corot, or the opal mornings that Daubigny has given us." In the same letter, he speaks of " the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London." His dislike for Nature and the natural life as contrasted to artificiality; and that mode of existence which claims to be the outcome of the highest civilisation developed as he grew older. The utterances of Vivian (through whose mouth Oscar Wilde speaks) where he decries Nature in " The Decay of Lying" are not so much brilliant paradox. They are the sincere expressions of Oscar Wilde's feeling on the subject. The passage from the first essay in " Intentions " may be quoted here.

" *Vivian* : Enjoy Nature ! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before ; that it reveals her secrets to us ; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely

unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but, as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape, I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. . . . "

A little lower down, Vivian continues :— " But Nature is so uncomfortable. Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of dreadful black insects. Why even Morris's poorest workman could make you a more comfortable seat than the whole of Nature can. . . . If Nature had been comfortable mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is indoor life."

People have been wont to point to " Intentions " as masterpieces of paradox. The truth is that these essays contain in paradoxical form Wilde's most orthodox creeds. The vigour with which he enunciates his opinions proceeds, no

doubt, from the knowledge that there is much pretence, not to say hypocrisy, in the general definitions of what is good and beautiful. This hypocrisy stirred his indignation and gave impetus to his pen. What ordinary man or woman of the world really cares for Nature in preference to urban haunts? What sincerity is there in the gushing rhapsodies about the beauties of the country to which it is fashionable to give utterance. How many times does the London dame or squire look up to the stars?

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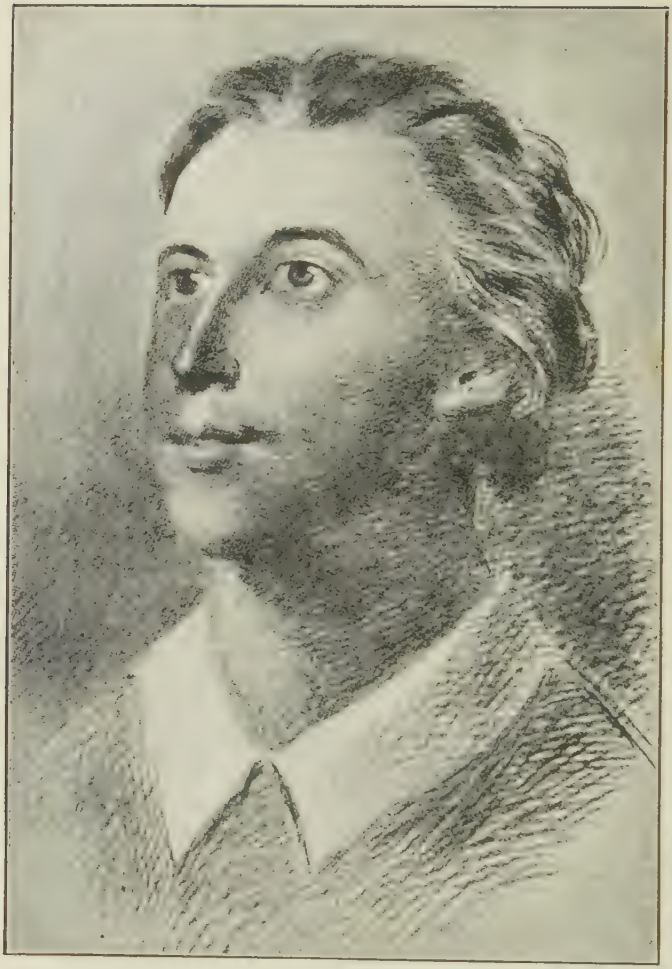
CHAPTER VI

Portora Royal School—Its Sectarian Character—Prompt Disillusionment—Oscar's Proficiency—Incapacity for Arithmetic—His Appearance as a Boy—His Precocity in a Dangerous Talent — His Fondness for Dress — His Unpopularity — His Eager Thirst for Knowledge — His Excellent Character—Matriculation at T.C.D.—His Reputation there—The Berkeley Gold Medal—The Classical Scholarship—His Marks—Why he left T.C.D.—He goes to Oxford—A Turning-Point in his Life—The Possible Dangers of a Student's Life—His University Achievements—"Not a Reading Man."

THE school which was selected for Oscar Wilde by his parents was a school founded by an English prince, the father of that "Pretender" whom one of the boy's ancestors had helped to overthrow. Possibly it was Speranza's great detestation of the "soulless iconoclast," Cromwell, that prompted her to send her sons to be *alumni* in a house of which King Charles was the founder, patron and benefactor, Portora Royal School, Enniskillen. Motives of economy may also have dictated this choice; for compared with the fees of an English public school, the charges at Portora are very small. There are three terms in the year, and the fees for each boarder—"a considerable reduction being made

in the case of brothers"—are only £17, 10s. per term. According to the present synopsis of the course of instruction the work of the higher forms is mainly directed towards preparation for the universities, and especially for Trinity College, Dublin. The school is under the government of The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education, of which the Right Rev. The Lord Bishop of Clogher, D.D., is the Chairman, and amongst the members of which are the Rector of Enniskillen and another Church of England clergyman. It is a sectarian school; for we notice amongst the provisions of the "Course of Instruction" there that: "Religious training is regarded as of supreme importance. The boarders are regularly instructed in Divinity, and on Sundays attend the respective Protestant churches in charge of responsible masters." From what precedes it is easy to imagine the bias with which English and Irish history must have been taught in this school, what Whiggish principles must have been instilled hour by hour into the pupils' minds, and what the prevailing opinion among Oscar's pastors and masters on Irish Nationalism, and the doings of the Young Ireland Party may have been. For instance, one may fancy the views of the Lord Bishop of Clogher, D.D.,



OSCAR WILDE AS A LAD. (FROM A RED CHALK DRAWING.)

on "The Glorious young Meagher." At first bewilderment must have come to the lad, who had been trained to admire his mother for the part she had taken in a movement which to the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop and the rest of The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education must have appeared in much the same light as did to the Lord Archbishop of Munster the proceedings of John of Leyden and the other Anabaptists in 1536. Bewilderment would give place to an insight into the insincerity of most political professions, and from this to cynicism and general disbelief would be but one step. "If the gods of our faith be liars, in whom shall we trust?"

Oscar went to this school when he was eleven years old. Lady Wilde's description of him as a wonderful boy who could do anything seems to have been justified by his early achievements at Portora. In 1868 he was already very high up in the school; he had, indeed, already reached the third class in his first year. It is recorded of him that he got "quicker into a book than any boy that ever lived." At the same time he was a great dunce in the mathematical class. He has been described by a schoolfellow of his, who is now a most distinguished man, as "absolutely incapable of mathematics." In

arithmetic he was hopelessly bad, and, as by the regulations of the school a certain proficiency in arithmetic was an indispensable qualification for the winning of certain prizes for scholarship, it was a usual thing to see young Oscar Wilde, on the eve of entering some examination, being coached in the elements of mathematical science by one of the junior masters. This early incapacity for figures explains much of the recklessness of his after life. The careful and parsimonious of this world are by instinct mathematicians, at least as far as the four great rules are concerned. It is recorded of most spendthrifts, on the other hand, that the faculty of calculation is an element lacking in their mental composition. Has the world's history any record of an extravagant mathematician ?

Oscar Wilde was a big boy, very tall for his age, and distinctly heavy of build. One of his schoolfellows says that " he used to flop about ponderously." He was not popular with the other boys. For one thing, he never played any games. In later life he used to say that he objected to cricket because the attitudes assumed were so indecent. He never rowed on the lake ; and he had for the musketry instructor and the drill sergeant contempt mingled with pity. His manner was very reserved, and he

used to keep aloof from the other boys. Another characteristic which made for his unpopularity amongst his schoolfellows, just as in later life it raised up against him so many implacable enemies, was the extraordinary gift he had of saying trenchant things about others. He was a very clever boy at giving nicknames. He was the ironical sponsor to the whole school from the Rev. William Steele, D.D., the headmaster, down to the smallest boy in class 1b. As a man, few wits have ever said cleverer and at the same time more biting things about their contemporaries. This capacity of his and his ruthless exercise thereof account for much of the hatred that is still alive against him years after his lonely death. Of one very famous contemporary Irish writer he remarked: "He has no enemies, but he is intensely disliked by his friends." Of the son of a famous pianist he once said, when the fact of this parentage was stated to him: "Well, I am glad that he has managed to survive it." Of an extraordinary Russian Jew who at various times essayed to fill in modern London the rôle of a Maecenas, a Heliogabalus, and other less worthy parts, and who hated Oscar Wilde with an intensity of hatred that almost made him interesting, he declared: "He came to London

in the hopes of founding a salon. He has succeeded only in opening a restaurant." He used to use this man's name as the symbol of ugliness. "As ugly as ——" was an expression constantly in his mouth. He described him as a "fœtus in a bottle." In "Intentions" one finds many compliments, *à rebours*, addressed to various of the prominent writers of the time. We are told that Hall Caine writes at the top of his voice; that Rudyard Kipling reveals life "by splendid flashes of vulgarity"; that as one turns over the pages of one of James Payn's novels, "the suspense of the author becomes quite unbearable"; that Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty; and that Marion Crawford has immolated himself on the altar of local colour. These remarks are all very clever, but they are not gratifying to the people about whom they were made, and would not tend to increase the satirist's number of friends. But Oscar Wilde seemed to go out of his way to offend people, not individuals alone, but whole sections of society. What solicitor, for instance, being present at the performance of his comedy, "The Importance of Being Earnest," and hearing his sneer at the social standing of the profession, as it was put into Lady Bracknell's mouth, but would feel a personal

grievance against the author for a gratuitous slight? These are the words referred to:

"*Lady Bracknell*: — Markby, Markby & Markby? A firm of the very highest position in their profession. Indeed, I am told that one of the Mr Markbys is occasionally to be seen at dinner-parties."

Elsewhere every stockbroker gets an unnecessary wound to his self-esteem. Indeed, few of the professions escape the lash of satire which seems prompted merely by the contempt of a man professing to voice aristocratic and elegant society, and its alleged disdain for men and women who have to work for a living. He carried his imprudence to the extent of insulting journalists with tedious insistence, thus fouling the very trumpets of modern reputation. There are many points in Oscar Wilde's career which allow of a comparison between him and the great Napoleon; and this deliberate delight in provoking enmities, this sheer reckless and uncharitable combativeness, is not the least striking characteristic common to both. In both men it arose from a delusion as to the extent of their powers, from a spirit of prepotence, from a most imprudent contempt of the aggregate force of the individual adversaries whom they so joyfully and so wilfully raised

up against themselves. This policy of mischief did not succeed in the hands of Napoleon ; it was therefore not likely to be more successful in the hands of Oscar Wilde. The latter was fond of reading the " Maximes " of the Duc de la Rochefoucault, and might have remembered to his advantage that the epigrammatist said that the man who thinks that he can do without society makes a mistake, but that the man who thinks that society cannot do without him makes a still greater mistake.

Although he is remembered at Portora as having been very clever in giving nicknames to others, none of his schoolfellows can recall what was his own particular soubriquet. He seems to have been generally known as " Oscar." As to his br er, Willy, he was known as " Blue-Blood." He was not a tidy boy ; he had inherited some of the paternal carelessness about his appearance, and having one day been remonstrated with for the umber of his neck and hands, declared very proudly that his skin was dark, not because it was dirty, but because of the blue blood in the veins of the Wildes. This anecdote might have been left unrecorded, but for the fact that it shows that the Wilde boys held a high opinion of their social standing, and may explain Oscar's subsequent determined

efforts to establish himself in London society, as also his contempt, referred to above, for people whose blood was not blue, and who had to work for their maintenance. And here it may once more be repeated that the exigencies of this biography make it impossible to discard any fact, on which friendship or reverence might plead for silence, when that fact can serve to throw light upon the complex problem of the character which we are engaged in studying.

Already in those days young Oscar Wilde showed that fondness for distinguished attire which ever marked him in life. He is remembered at Portora as the only boy there who used to wear a top hat. "It was always a very fashionable hat, of the latest style." All the boys at Portora were provided by school regulations as to the outfit, with one Black Silk Hat, but this was for Sunday wear only. Oscar never discarded his. He was always very well dressed, and wore his hair long. "He had a good wisp of hair!" is said of him still in Enniskillen. He did not appear to be very friendly with his brother Willy. "He was very superior in his manner towards Willy." The latter was much more popular with the boys. The little boys at Portora, especially, had the greatest affection for Willy Wilde. Even in

those early days he had all the charming *talents de société* which afterwards won him much success. He used to tell stories to the children, and he used to play the piano for them.

Oscar was considered exceedingly clever in literature—that is to say in his knowledge of books. At the same time the future author of "Intentions" never showed any superiority in composition. "He never stood out in essays," remarks one of his masters, who adds: "Oscar Wilde was never looked upon as a formidable competitor by the boys who went in for examinations in Portora school." His conduct was uniformly good. There was not a breath of a complaint about him in any way, except some short time before he left the school, when, as one of his schoolfellows relates, "he got into an awful row with the headmaster. He had cheeked old Steele something awful." That there was nothing of the decadent about Oscar Wilde in his school-days is the ananimous declaration of many men who were boys at school with him. He was a great reader, and assimilated what he read in a remarkable manner. He used to get through a book with a speed that astonished everybody; and what he had read thus rapidly, he used to remember. He read nothing but English books, and these

were generally classical novels. He displayed no particular efficiency in French in those days. He had a great fondness for handsome books and choice editions. "When he came so prominently before the world as an æsthete," relates a Don at T.C.D, "we all tried to remember any indication that he had given as a lad of a taste for beautiful things, and the only thing that we could recall in this connection was that he always had most expensive copies of class-books. He had, for instance, a beautiful large paper edition of Æschylus." During his last year at Portora, when he was a lad of sixteen, his eager thirst for knowledge and his great receptivity were matters of observation and comment. Often when Mr Purser was instructing the class in history or in geography Oscar Wilde would contrive by means of some cleverly put question to lead the master into a disquisition on some topic on which he desired to gain information. The subject in hand would be forgotten; the master, ever prompted by his pupil, would unbosom himself of his store of learning. Sometimes the whole of the hour would be thus absorbed. At other times the master would bring the discussion back to the subject of the lesson, and then it was a sight to see the lad, all alert, thinking and planning

how, next day, he could turn the master once more on to the question in which he needed instruction—questions often as obstruse as the relative definitions of nominalism and realism.

In arithmetic he made no progress at all while at school, and many boys remember the efforts which Mr Purser used to make to cram him with the elementary rules.

It was, perhaps, in the competition for the Gold Medal which is the great distinction at Portora that Oscar Wilde displayed his peculiar capacity for mastering the contents of a classical book. "In the *viva voce*," says one of his competitors, "which was on the Agamemnon of Æschylus, he simply walked away from us all." He gained 25 per cent. higher marks in this examination than the nearest to him.

In October 1871 Oscar Wilde matriculated at Trinity College, Dublin. In the matriculation examination where he obtained the second place his marks in the various subjects were as follows: (The maxim number of marks obtainable in each subject was 10.)

Greek, Two Papers—8, 8.
Latin, Two Papers—8, 7.
Latin Composition—4.
English Composition—5.
History—8.
Arithmetic—2.

His total was thus 50. The total obtained by another Portora boy, the gentleman who is now the Junior Bursar of Trinity College, and who ranks as one of the most distinguished classical scholars in the country, was 65. On the second day of the examination, where the subjects were the Higher Classics, Oscar Wilde obtained 46 marks; whilst the boy who had so outstripped him on the previous day in the rudiments only obtained 36 marks. Oscar Wilde's neglect of the rudiments was always a feature of his character.

He is registered on the matriculation book of Trinity College in the following terms and under the headings given:—

MATRICULATION ENTRY

Johannes Malet Praelector Primarius

Dies Mensis	*Admissorum Nomina*	*Qualitates*	*Fidei Professiones*
Oct. 10	Oscar Wilde	P.	I. C.
Patres	*Patrum Qualitates*	*Nativitatum Loca*	*Aetatis Anni*
Wm.	Physician	Dublin	16

He was at that time just within six days of his seventeenth birthday. At this time of his life, therefore, Oscar Wilde displayed side by side, with a brilliant capacity for reading and understanding the classics, a not quite first-rate knowledge of the elements of classical knowledge. He was undistinguished in Latin composition, which exacts this mastery of the rudiments,

mediocre in English composition, and unsatisfactory in arithmetic. It is related of Emile Zola, it may be remembered, that he was rejected at his examination for the baccalaureat degree for inefficiency in composition.

During his year's attendance at Trinity College, Dublin, his conduct was irreproachable. "He left this College," says one of the Dons who was a fellow-student of his, "with the very highest character." Beyond the foolish remark of his, that invitation of a fellow-undergraduate to come to his father's house, which has been quoted above, not a single thing is remembered against him. It was for this reason, no doubt, that no official cognisance was taken by Trinity College, Dublin, of his public disgrace; his name was not deleted on any of the honourable records on which his capacity, excellence and industry had inscribed it. At Portora Royal College, on the other hand, a resolution was taken by The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education in virtue of which the inscription of honour of his name on the stone tablets of the schoolhouse would have been erased, when, *mirabile dictu*, it transpired that outraged Nature herself had forestalled The Fermanagh Protestant Board of Education in the execution of this salutary sacrifice. The slab on which

Oscar Wilde's name was inscribed in letters of gold had cracked right across the ill-reputed words: Nature had effaced the name. In a less enlightened place, amongst the ignorant and superstitious Irish who are not Protestants, the circumstance might have been hailed as a miracle.

He was considered a highly gifted, amiable young man, likely to win a high place as a scholar. In the various college examinations he continually distinguished himself. He was first out of fourteen in the First Rank in the Michaelmas Prize Examination 1872; in Hilary Term he was third of the First Rank. The gentleman, now a Privy Councillor, who was Solicitor General under the last Tory Administration, was an undergraduate of the same standing as Oscar Wilde, and with the other junior freshman, competed in the same examinations. He did not, however, emerge from the Second Rank. In later life these two men were to be once more in fierce competition, the fiercest competition, perhaps, that has ever been waged in the Old Bailey Court between a witness for the prosecution and a counsel for the defence; and here too Oscar Wilde was to hold the superior rank. It has been stated that the barrister has admitted that until towards the very end of his cross-

examination of the prosecutor he felt that he had had the worst of it all along. He was just about to sit down when an answer of fatal insolence and folly brought the whole of Wilde's splendid defence of himself crumbling to the ground, gave an opening to his more patient adversary, and exposed him to devastation and ruin. This cross-examination of Oscar Wilde in the Queensberry trial is still eagerly studied by advocates as a lesson how a barrister should act when brought face to face with a hostile witness of such consummate readiness, power and nerve. The barrister's triumph in this case was a complete one; but the reason for that was rather because the witness had become intoxicated with his own triumph throughout, lost his head in consequence of this, and in an imprudent moment destroyed the whole effect of his previous answers. The report teaches what patience can do, and a knowledge of the rudiments; and in that sense is a triumph for the counsel. He might well have lost his head. He did not. He waited and watched, and in the words of a barrister who was sitting in court at his side, "pounced like a hawk," upon the witness when the long-waited-for opportunity arose.

Amongst certain men, prominent at Trinity

College, Oscar Wilde was held "an average sort of man," and surprise was expressed when he came to the front. Such surprise can only have proceeded from that innocency and ignorance of the things of this world which are the most beautiful traits in the character of the deeply learned. Success in the world, the acclaim of the populace do not go to the modest and retiring scholar. It is an age of advertisement, and even the greatest talents must conform to the commercial exigencies of the hour. One may see any day in any of the big public libraries, the shabby, hungered, half-blinded man of great learning and knowledge elbowed by the secretary of some popular novelist who is collecting facts for his master. The secretary is well-dressed, well-fed, and shines with the reflected light of his employer, who, very probably, earns in one hour more than the great scholar can gain in a week of laborious days and nights.

In a letter written by Lady Wilde to Mr O'Donoghue she begs him not to omit to mention in writing a biographical notice of her that both her sons were Gold Medallists, "a distinction," she said, "of which they are both very proud." Oscar's gold medal was the Berkeley Medal. This prize was founded by

the famous Bishop Berkeley, who denied the existence of matter, and of whom Lord Byron wrote that when he said that there was no matter it really was no matter what he said. It was possibly from a desire to be consistent with his principles that the Bishop left so small a sum for the purpose of this prize that the Berkeley Gold Medal is not materially one of much value. As a distinction, however, it is highly prized. The subject in which candidates were examined in 1874 was "The Fragments of the Greek Comic Poets, as edited by Meineke," and the prize was won by Oscar Wilde. It will illustrate to what financial straits the poor man was put even at a time when his name was in everybody's mouth, that in 1883 after his successful visit to Paris, and while he was lecturing all over England, he was obliged to go to the magistrate at Marlborough Police Court to make a statutory declaration concerning the loss of a pawn-ticket which was the voucher for Bishop Berkeley's gold medal.

In the books of Trinity College there is no record of the marks earned by the various competitors who entered for the Berkeley Prize in 1874. The mere fact that this was won by Oscar Wilde is registered in the records of the college. With regard, however, to the scholar-

ship which Oscar Wilde had won in the previous year full particulars of his various markings are to be found. They are of some interest, as illustrating the state of his mental capacity in the different subjects in which the candidates were examined.

Oscar Wilde's marks in the various subjects were the following. In each case 10 was the maximum number of marks obtainable.

Viva Voce Thucydides—8.

Viva Voce Tacitus—7½.

Greek Prose Composition—5. (The examiner in this subject was Mr Stack, "a notoriously hard marker." The best marks given were 6½, which were obtained by Joseph King, who, however, only got the last place but one among the selected candidates. He was ninth, while Oscar Wilde was sixth.)

Greek Translation—7. (This was the best mark given.)

Greek Tragedians (Questions on)—7.

Latin Comedians (Questions on)—7.

Latin Prose Translation on Paper—6.

Latin Prose Composition—3½.

Demosthenes—5.

Ancient History—7.

Greek Verse (Passages on Paper)—5.

Greek Verse Composition.—1. (Here Mr Wm. Roberts was the examiner. He was a "character as a 'Varsity Don," a very hard examiner. In this subject most of the candidates scored no better than Oscar Wilde, some got no marks at all, a plump duck's egg figures against their names in the Trinity record. One or two got two marks. Messrs Montgomery and L. C. Purser, who were first and second in the final classification, each got five marks.)

Greek Viva Voce (Mr Tyrell, examiner)—6.
Latin Viva Voce (Mr Tyrell, examiner)—5½.
Translation from Latin Poets—4.
English Composition—6. (This was the highest number of marks scored in this subject by any of the candidates.)
Latin and Greek Grammar—4.

In the final result Oscar Wilde got the sixth place out of ten selected candidates. Joseph King, who was considered the cleverest man in the college was placed ninth. The following is the complete list of selected candidates in their order of merit.

Malcolm Montgomery.
Louis Claude Purser.
Richard Hennessy.
Thomas Corr.
Goddard Henry Orpen.
Oscar Wilde.
William Ridgeway.
George Thomas Vanston.
Joseph King.
Arthur M'Hugh.

An examination of the marks obtained by Oscar Wilde sets forth that while still weak in the rudiments he had made great progress in English composition. He was to make still greater progress in the event.

The Trinity College Scholarships, like the Gold Medal, lack in that materialism which the Bishop denied. They carry with them no great

emolument. A T.C.D. scholar obtains rooms in college at half the usual fees charged to students. He has no fees to pay for tuition, and he gets his dinners for nothing. But there is no income attached to the position. "Oscar Wilde never held his scholarship at Trinity College," one learns, "as he preferred to go to Oxford, where better things are to be won."

In the following year, accordingly, he went to Oxford, won a demyship at Magdalen College, of the annual value of £95, tenable for five years, and matriculated at Magdalen on 17th October.

He writes in "De Profundis" of his entrance into the English University, as the great turning-point of his life.

"I want to get to the point," he writes, "when I shall be able to say quite simply, and without affectation, that the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison."

It is possible that when he wrote those lines he was thinking that if he had never been sent to Oxford, the extraordinary latent madness which had brought him to the terrible place where he sat, might never have been roused into fatal activity. For there is no use denying it: Oxford, which is the finest school in the world for the highest culture, is also the worst training-

ground for the lowest forms of debauchery. It all depends on the character of the student, his early home-training, his natural propensities, his physical state, his religious belief. Oxford produces side by side the saint, the sage, and the depraved libertine. She sends men to Parnassus or to the public-house, to Latium or the lenocinium. The Dons ignore the horrors which are going on under their very eyes. They are wrapped up in the petty concerns of the University hierarchy ; they are of men the most unpractical and least worldly; while possibly their deep classical studies have so familiarised them with certain pathological manifestations that they really fail to understand the horror of much that is the common jest of the undergraduates. Oxford has rendered incalculable services to the Empire, but she has also fostered and sent forth great numbers of men who have contributed to poison English society. It is very possible that if Sir William Wilde had not sent his second son to Oxford, but had left him in Ireland, where certain forms of perversion are totally unknown, and where vice generally is regarded with a universal horror which contrasts most strongly with the mischievous tolerances that English society manifests towards it, Oscar would now be living in Dublin, one of the lights

of Trinity College, one of the glories of Ireland, a scholar and a gentleman of universal reputation. Let any Oxford man who remembers his undergraduates days, who remembers the things that used to be jested about there, and the common talk at the wines about this man or that, ask himself when he has condemned Oscar Wilde whether *alma mater* may not have been to blame, in part if not *in toto*, for the tremendous and terrible metamorphosis that was worked in Oscar Wilde's character, admitting that the young man, who left Trinity College with a spotless reputation, really did develop in so short a time into the dangerous maniac such as he afterwards came to be considered. The man who approaches the study of this extraordinary degeneration of character (admitting the common aspect of the Oscar Wilde of later years to be justified) in a scientific spirit and without bias, cannot fail to feel the gravest suspicion that Oscar Wilde was to a very large extent a victim of the Oxford educational system, of the Oxford environment. To the same dangers as those to which he succumbed any impressionable lad is exposed, who, starting with no strong moral sense, his native virtue weakened by evil example at home, is immersed in a year-long course of study, in which in the finest language

that the world has ever voiced men and women are glorified who in the present day would be considered monsters fit only for the stake, and where in almost divine poetry are celebrated passions and acts which society and the church now point to as the very abomination of desolation. In a pathetic letter which Oscar Wilde wrote to a friend of his after his release from prison he said : " I have still difficulty in understanding why the frequentation of Sporus should be considered so much more criminal than the frequentation of Messalina." It is, moreover, a well-established pathological fact that the men in whom certain aberrations develop with the most hideous fecundity are men of great scholarship whose moral sense has been warped by studies in which they have come to identify their environment with that of the men and women of antiquity.

In scholarship Oscar Wilde progressed with surprising rapidity. His career as a student was a most successful one. He took a First Class in Moderations in the Honours School (Trinity Term 1876), and two year later, in Trinity Term 1878, he took a First Class in the " Honour Finals." Yet he was never a reading man, and was rarely to be seen at his books.

Photo by Elliot & Fry.

RUSKIN.

CHAPTER VII

Oscar Wilde at Oxford—John Ruskin—The Extent of his Influence on Oscar Wilde—Ruskin's Socialism—Oscar Wilde as a Social Reformer—His Immense Influence Abroad—Oscar as an Undergraduate—His Rooms at Magdalen — His Appearance — He is "Ragged" — His Physical and Moral Courage—His Leanings to Catholicism —His Journey in Greece—The Effect upon him—Early Writings in Prose and Verse—"Ravenna"—The Irony of Fate—"Ravenna" Symbolical of his own Career.

DURING some part of Oscar Wilde's first term at Oxford—that is to say, during one month in Michaelmas Term 1874—John Ruskin, Slade Professor of Fine Arts, was lecturing twice a week in the Oxford Museum on the "Æsthetic and Mathematic schools of Art in Florence." This was the second course of lectures delivered by Ruskin during that term, and this course was divided into eight lectures, classified under three separate titles. The first three lectures (Series A) dealt with (1) Arnolfo, (2) Cimabue, (3) Giotto. This series described the "Æsthetic Schools of 1300." The next series of three lectures (Series B), treated of the "Mathematic Schools of 1400," and the various lectures expounded, (4) Brunelleschi, the architect of the

Pitti Palace in Florence, (5) Quercia, and (6) Ghiberti. The "Final Efforts of Æsthetic Art in Florence" formed the subject of the two concluding lectures (Series C), and these treated of (7) Angelico, and (8) Botticelli.

Oscar Wilde was a constant attendant at these lectures, and there can be no doubt that they produced a very strong impression on his mind, as, indeed, Ruskin's discourses did on every man who heard them. They must have opened up a new field of interest to the young Irishman, have afforded him new subjects on which to talk, and have suggested to him, by the spectacle of the great enthusiasm which Mr Ruskin aroused, the opportunism of a minor apostolate in a creed so obviously popular and successful. But there does not appear to be any grounds for saying, as has so often been said, that Oscar Wilde was greatly influenced by Mr Ruskin. It was not probable that this would be so seeing that the whole period of Ruskin's public appearances that term did not exceed twenty-four days, and that in that period it is not possible for one man to influence another to the extent of tinging his whole psychology. Oscar Wilde was a man of extraordinary receptivity, but even to him it would have been impossible to absorb Ruskin's teachings and example so that these should

have any permanent effect on his character, in so short a period. At that time he was fresh at Oxford ; a hundred things presented themselves every day to divert his attention ; his mentality was in no way prepared to receive the master's teachings ; and altogether it seems as absurd to state that Ruskin influenced the whole of his character and his life by means of the eight lectures which Oscar Wilde attended as a freshman during his first term in Oxford, as it was incredible that the perusal of a single book could pervert the mental composition of a man. These matters have to be looked at from a scientific point of view ; the plain facts have to be considered and the evidence that can be adduced. There is no trace of any Ruskin influence in Oscar Wilde's after life, and it would be a psychological miracle if there had been.

It is true that the young man was brought into personal contact with the master, and that he was one of the " ardent young men " who gathered round Mr Ruskin in his practical demonstrations of the Gospel of Labour. In one of the notices of Oscar Wilde's early life we find the following reference to this : " The influence of Ruskin was so great that Mr Wilde, though holding games in abomination, and detesting violent exercise, might have been seen

on grey November mornings breaking stones on the roadsides—not unbribed, however; 'he had the honour of filling Mr Ruskin's especial wheelbarrow,' and it was the great author of 'Modern Painters' himself who taught him how to trundle it."

Mr E. T. Cook in his very able monograph, "Some Aspects of Mr Ruskin's Work," which is one part of his "Studies in Ruskin," gives the following account of the "road-digging experiment," referred to above. "No professor, I suppose, has had more power of personal influence over his pupils, or has used it more for good, than Mr Ruskin. One of the methods which he adopted for gathering a circle of ardent young men around him, and impregnating them with his spirit, was the subject of much sarcastic comment. This was the famous road-digging experiment. No one was more alive to the amusing side of the affair than Mr Ruskin himself. The road which his pupils made is, he has been heard to admit, about the worst in the three kingdoms, and for any level places in it he gives the credit to his gardener, whom he incontinently summoned from Brantwood. Nevertheless the experiment, even from the point of view of road-making, was by no means barren. An inch of practice is worth a yard of

preaching; and Mr Ruskin's road-digging at Hincksey gave a powerful stimulus to the Gospel of Labour, of the same kind as the later and independent stimulus of Count Tolstoi; of whom Mr Ruskin has spoken gratefully in recent years as his successor. But the fact is that most of the Oxford road-diggers were attracted to the work, not for its own sake, but for the reward of it—the reward of the subsequent breakfast-party and informal talks in Mr Ruskin's rooms at Corpus. It was in Mr Ruskin's Oxford Lectures and these supplementary enforcements of their teaching that the seeds were sown or watered, of that practical interest in social questions which is the 'Oxford movement of to-day.'"

It would be an insult to the lofty intellect of Oscar Wilde, immature as he then was, receptive as he always was, to suppose that the socialism of Mr Ruskin, that Tolstoism *d'avant la lettre*, which enangers and disgusts every true reformer, had any influence upon him whatever, and that the author of that magnificent *plaidoyer*, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," did not fully realise the grotesqueness of these *bourgeois* buffooneries. One has the highest respect for Mr Ruskin; but what opinion is likely to be held by anyone who knows the real condition of the

poor in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland who is invited to admire the Slade Professor of Fine Art haranguing in the following terms an audience of young bourgeois and aristocrats, greasy and replete with unctuous breakfast, clad in warm clothing, opulent and perky :—" I tell you that neither sound art, policy, nor religion can exist in England until, neglecting, if it must be, your own pleasure-gardens and pleasure-chambers, you resolve that the streets which are the habitation of the poor, and the fields which are the playgrounds of their children, shall be again restored to the rule of the spirits whosoever they are in earth and heaven, that ordain and reward, with constant and conscious felicity, all that is decent and orderly, beautiful and pure." This is the kind of talk that gets Social Reformers into Whig Cabinets and raises statues to them by subscription of the middle classes. It does not deceive the people for a single moment, and it does not for a single moment deceive those who instinctively or by long observation understand the wants of the people and know what wrongs of theirs ought to be redressed. It would not deceive Oscar Wilde, who intuitively rather than by observation, for he recoiled from any sights that might distress his æsthetic

taste, so fully understood the problem of the poor. It is among some of his friends an abiding regret that he was not spared a few years longer, so that in the depth of his despair he might have seen the wonderful triumph that Germany has prepared for him, might have watched the crowds flocking to the theatre to see "Salomé" played, might have listened to the frantic enthusiasm which this play never fails to evoke, might a little later on have realised that it had been given to him by this play to stimulate to the highest expression of his wonderful art the composer Richard Strauss, whom the *cognoscenti* hail as the greatest *maestro* who ever lived. Amongst other of his friends the regret will be greater that it never came to his knowledge that all over Europe amongst the poor, oppressed and outcast, his name is reverenced as that of an apostle of the liberties of man. No writing on the social question, perhaps, has produced a profounder impression than his on the continent, where "The Soul of Man" has been translated into every tongue. Amongst the very poorest and most forlorn, and most desperate of the helots of Europe, the Jews of Russia and Poland, Oscar Wilde, known to them only as the author of this essay, is regarded in the light of a prophet, a benefactor, a

saint. In many of the awful kennels in Warsaw and Lublin, in Kieff and Libau his portrait is pinned to the wall. Such is the interest taken in him that recently, his friend, the author of "Oscar Wilde," "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship," received from a Jewish gentleman living in the East End of London a request that he should furnish his correspondent with biographical details about Oscar Wilde, to be prefixed in form of a preface to a new edition of the Yiddish translation of "The Soul of Man," such particulars having been eagerly asked for from the Jewish proletariat all over Poland and Russia.

Mr Ruskin left for Venice at the end of Michaelmas Term 1874, and did not return to Oxford till a year later, when he delivered a series of twelve lectures on "The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds," during the month of November. During 1876 he did not lecture at all, and it was not till Michaelmas 1877 that he was seen again as Slade Professor of Fine Art. Under the circumstances it is nonsense to assert that his influence on Oscar Wilde extended any further than what is indicated in Walter Hamilton's most interesting book, "The Æsthetic Movement in England," in the chapter which treats of Oscar Wilde.

"But unfortunately," he writes, "Mr Ruskin

left for Venice at the end of Mr Wilde's first term; not, however, before he had inoculated a number of the young collegians with artistic tastes. Mr Wilde occupied some fine old wainscoted rooms over the river in that college which is thought by many to be the most beautiful in Oxford. These rooms he had decorated with painted ceilings and handsome dados, and they were filled with treasures of art picked up at home and abroad; and here he held social meetings, which were attended by numbers of the men who were interested in art, or music, or poetry, and who for the most part practised some one of these in addition to the ordinary collegiate studies."

It was at this time, therefore, that a rôle was forced upon the young man, which he had no natural qualifications to play; it was here that the curtain rose on that tragi-comedy in which his fine intellect was to lend itself to grotesque performances until, just before a period was put to his existence, he really found himself. It was from these reunions in Magdalen that dated that virtuosity in music and painting and the decorative arts which he was forced to assume by the hazards of life, his own necessities and the folly of his contemporaries. He knew little about music, and little about

painting, and in the matter of furniture, tapestries, wall-papers and architecture he was no more of a *connoisseur* than is any man who can assimilate the current modes and the chatter of the arbiters. During a long period of his life this pose which had been forced upon him must have galled his native rectitude. Face to face with himself he must have felt that it was an unworthy part for a man of his great intellect and wonderful gifts to play. Perhaps it was from this feeling that in some respects he was playing a double-faced rôle that proceeded that curious self-accusing manner, which all his intimates noticed in him, and which filled them with astonishment. It is a fact that music bored him ; it is a fact that he had no knowledge of any instrument ; it is probable that he could with difficulty distinguish one tune from another. Yet he was forced to posture as a *connoisseur*, and to speak and write about musicians and music with the air of one who was profoundly versed in all the technique of the art. A friend of his relates that the rare occasion on which he saw Oscar Wilde angry with him was once when he had frequently repeated in his presence a phrase from one of Oscar's essays, a phrase which had struck him by its effectiveness so that he had the pleasure

in repeating it that actors have in mouthing a "gag" which has caught the popular ear. This phrase was: "a splendid scarlet thing by Dvorak." At the third repetition of these words, Oscar Wilde flew into a veritable passion and rebuked the friend for wishing to ridicule him. It has always been held by the man who relates this story that Oscar's anger was caused by the suspicion that his friend knew that his claim to write about Dvorak or any other composer was a mere pretence, and that he cleverly veiled his ignorance by the use of sonorous and effective phrases.

Mr Hamilton quotes the following passage as given by "one who was acquainted with Mr Wilde at Oxford" as descriptive of his life there:

"He soon began to show his taste for art and china, and before he had been at Oxford very long, his rooms were quite the show ones of the college and of the university too. He was fortunate enough to obtain the best situated rooms in the college, on what is called the kitchen staircase, having a lovely view over the river Cherwell and the beautiful Magdalen walks, and Magdalen bridge. His rooms were three in number, and the walls were entirely panelled. The two sitting-rooms were connected by an arch, where folding doors had at one

time stood. His blue china was supposed by *connoisseurs* to be very valuable and fine, and there was plenty of it. The panelled walls were thickly hung with old engravings—chiefly engravings of the fair sex artistically clad as nature clad them. He was hospitable, and on Sunday nights after "Common Room" his rooms were generally the scene of conviviality, where undergraduates of all descriptions and tastes were to be met, drinking punch, or a "B. and S.," with their cigars. It was at one of these entertainments that he made his well-known remark, "Oh, would that I could live up to my blue china!" His chief amusement was riding, though he never used to hunt. He was generally to be met on the cricket-field, but never played himself; and he was a regular attendant at his college barge to see the May eight-oar races, but he never used to trust his massive form to a boat himself."

At this time he had not yet adopted those eccentricities of costume which a few years later attracted universal attention to his person. The portraits which exist of him as an undergraduate of Oxford represent him comfortably and soberly attired in a tweed suit, a flannel shirt, with a tie unassumingly gathered into a knot under his turn-down collar. In the winter he used to wear an ordinary grey ulster. His hair which

was brushed back from his forehead was not too long. The best known photograph of Oscar Wilde at this period—that is to say in 1878—is the "amateurish and therefore faithful" picture of him taken by a man who was then a well-known character in Oxford, whose name was Guggenheim. This man used to be known as "Gug" by the undergraduates. He was a kind of Hans Breitmann, a typical stage-German, with tasselled smoking-cap, carpet slippers, and a long-stemmed china pipe. His studio was in the "High," and he had a reputation for taking "College groups" in an effective manner.

Oscar Wilde attempted while an undergraduate to render himself proficient in painting, but nothing that he ever painted has survived. There is a story that for a period during vacation he studied art in Paris; and it is remembered at Oxford that being once asked by a Magdalen celebrity, as a joke, what he would do if his means suddenly failed him and if he were to be thrown on his own resources, he answered: "I should live in a garret and paint beautiful pictures." However, no one at Oxford, who knew him in those days, can remember seeing him paint, and a suspicion existed that he could not paint at all, and that his remark was only the outcome of the deception which he had resolved to prac-

tise. It is quite probable, though, that he may have attempted painting, and being dissatisfied with his progress preferred to "talk pictures" instead of painting them. *Il passa sa vie à se parler*, and not with reference to pictures alone.

Not in his dress, therefore, at that time, but in his conversation and manners rather did he assume that "dangerous and delightful distinction of being different from others," of which he writes in his remarkable essay on Thomas Griffiths Wainewright ("Pen, Pencil, and Poison," in "Intentions"). Yet, such as it was, his affectation irritated the undergraduates, and on one occasion, at least, they manifested their displeasure with the brutality which these over-fed young men sometimes display. Oscar was once "ragged" at Oxford. Some eight healthy young Philistines waylaid the "blue china cove" while out walking, fell upon him, bound him with cords and dragged him up a hill, trailing him along the ground. He was much hurt and bruised, but he did not resist, for that was useless; nor did he protest with a single word. When at last they released him at the top of the hill he simply flicked the dust off his coat with the air of a Regency beau flipping the grains from his *tabatiére* off his lace *jabot*, and looking at the prospect said: "Yes; the view

from this hill is really very charming." Courage was not wanting to him, either physical or moral. Indeed very few men have displayed either quality in a more remarkable degree. During the period that he was out on bail between his first and second trials his moral courage surprised and impressed all who beheld him. He refused to avoid the impending danger by flight ; with heroism he faced the awful prospect that lay before him. With regard to physical courage it is on record that while a young man in London he assisted a man, a friend, to escape from the police, and in the furtherance of this object exerted great physical strength, holding a door against a number of constables, while the fugitive was clambering out of the window to safety and freedom. In Paris he once expressed his desire to learn the use of the rapier so that he might be able to impose silence at the point of the sword on the slanderers who were attacking his reputation. The fact is that Oscar Wilde was really a man of action. In this respect he resembles many great Irishmen who have found for their energies no other outlet than that of writing. This aspect of Oscar's character is held by certain of his friends who had the opportunity of studying his nature at first hand. In other times and under other circumstances

he might have been one of the greatest men of action of the world. Possibly the fact that his surroundings did not permit him to give play to this desire for action, but pinned him down to the writing-table, generated not only that indolence and indifference which characterised him, but fostered also that pessimism which in the end killed him. "Cette tristesse et ce comique d'être un homme," of which Octave Mirbeau speaks, and which make for despair, are felt by none so keenly as by men who, burning to do, are by circumstance condemned to inactivity. The men who banished Napoleon to St Helena could have found in the torture-house of the kings no infliction more cruel.

During his stay in Oxford Oscar Wilde contributed various poems and prose writings to magazines published in Dublin, notably to the T.C.D. publication, *Kottabos*, and *The Irish Monthly*.

His first contribution to *Kottabos* appeared in Vol. ii. (1877) where it may be found on page 268. It is a poem headed :

ΔΗΖΙΘΥΜΟΝ ΕΡΩΤΟΞ ΑΝΘΟΞ

(The Rose of Love and with a Rose's Thorns)

and begins :

"My limbs are wasted with a flame. . . ."

This poem appears under another title in his first volume of collected poems. On page 298 of the same volume of *Kottabos* is to be found a poem, adapted from the Greek, entitled "Threnodia" (Eur. Hec. 444-483), and described as a "song sung by captive women of Troy on the sea-beach at Aulis, while the Achaeans were then storm-bound thro' the wrath of dishonoured Achilles, and waiting for a fair wind to bring them home." The first strophe is as follows:—

"O Fair Wind blowing from the sea!
Who through the dark and mist dost guide
The ships that on the billows ride,
Unto what land, ah, misery!
Shall I be borne, across what stormy wave
Or to whose house a purchased slave!"

This Threnody was very judiciously omitted from his volume of poems. In the same volume we find on page 320, "A fragment from the Agamemnon of Æschylus"; and on page 331, a poem beginning, "Two crowned Kings." All these poems are signed with his full initials, "O. F. O. F. W. W.," which shows that he had not yet come to regard with disfavour those patronymics which proclaimed his Irish descent and aggressively asserted his nationality. The same signature is found to a poem published on page 56 of the third volume of *Kottabos* (1881),

entitled "Wasted Days" ("From a Picture Painted by Miss V. T."). This poem is significant, because we find here the first indications that he was assuming a mode of writing about physical qualities which later on was to be brought up in evidence against him. Almost the very words are here employed which were repeated in a letter, the writing of which, after it had been made public, may nearly be said to have precipitated his ruin. This poem begins:

> "A fair slim boy not made for this world's pain,
> Pale cheeks whereon no kiss has left its stain,
> Red underlip drawn in for fear of Love"—

and so on.

It is on page 476 of the fifth volume of *The Irish Monthly* that one of the earliest published prose writings of Oscar Wilde is to be found. This was written in 1877 in Rome. It describes the Tomb of Keats, that Keats who was afterwards to inspire the writer with one of the noblest sonnets in the English language.[1] The short article is headed with a quotation from some guide-book: "As one enters Rome from the Via Ostiensis by the Porta San Paolo the first object that meets the eye is a marble pyramid which stands close at hand on the left."

"This tomb," writes the young Oxonian,

[1] On the sale of the love-letters of Keats.

" had been supposed to be that of Remus. It really was that of one Caius Cestius, a Roman gentleman of small note who died about 30 B.C."

" Yet," he continues, " though we cannot care much for the dead man who lies in lonely state beneath it, and who is only known to the world through his sepulchre, still this pyramid will be ever dear to the eyes of all English-speaking people, because at evening its shadow falls on the tomb of one who walks with Spenser, and Shakespeare, and Byron, and Shelley, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in the great procession of the sweet singers of England."

Speaking of the poet's likeness he says in a note :—

" I think that the best representation of the poet would be a coloured bust, like that of the young Rajah of Koolapoor at Florence, which is a lovely and lifelike work of art."

He concludes :—

" As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy I thought of him as of a Priest of Beauty slain before his time ; and the vision of Guido's San Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced with arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned

gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens. And thus my thoughts shaped themselves to rhyme."

Here follows the poem on the death of Keats, which here is entitled "Heu Miserande Puer."

This description of Oscar Wilde's feelings by the grave of Keats is of special interest when it is remembered that after his release from prison he assumed the name of Sebastian. No doubt Guido's picture came before his eyes in his cell in Reading Gaol, and he felt of himself that though pierced with arrows his eyes were still fixed on the heavens, which during his confinement, as is very clearly shown in "De Profundis," had, indeed, opened before his gaze, revealing to him beauties of which he had never dreamed before.

To *The Irish Monthly* he contributed various poems. In vol. iv. (1876), on page 594, we find a poem headed "The True Knowledge," beginning :

> "Thou knowest all—I seek in vain
> What lands to till or sow."

In vol. v. of the same publication are various pieces which afterwards appeared in the collected poems. We find on page 415 the poem

which in his volume is entitled "Sonnet on Approaching Italy," and which begins:

"I reached the Alps; the soul within me burned."

This sonnet is here entitled "Salve Saturnia Tellus."

On page 755 we find the poem "Vita Nuova," as in his volume it is called, beginning:

"I stood by the unvintageable sea."

In *The Irish Monthly* this poem is entitled Πoντος Ατρυετος.

Amongst other contributions to this volume of *The Irish Monthly* is his poem "Lotus Leaves," beginning:

"There is no peace beneath the noon."

It is stated that it was "impelled by Ruskin's lectures" that "Mr Wilde visited Italy." This is of doubtful exactness. If Mr Ruskin's discourses had inspired him with the desire to study the painters about whom the Slade Professor lectured, Oscar Wilde would have found the finest specimens of their art much nearer home. He very probably went to Italy for the same reason that takes many young Oxonians abroad, whose means are not stinted, and who are fond of travelling. There is amongst the writers of biographical notices often a desire to do what a

French popular idiom describes as "chercher midi a quatorze heures," to attribute to all kinds of influences the most commonplace acts of the people of whom they treat. Cook & Sons and the other tourists' agencies take many more people to Italy than ever Ruskin's lectures will send there. The greatest of men have often the simplest motives for their ordinary acts.

In the same notice we read, what is much more to the point, that "In Florence he became aware of the spiritual element in art, and turned wistfully towards that religion which had inspired the great Italian painters. During this mood he produced some fine poems, notably that entitled 'Rome Unvisited,' which won high praise from Cardinal Newman; but the last wave of the ebbing tide of the Tractarian Movement, though it lifted him off his feet, did not carry him away." It is quite true that at this time of his life he had some desire to join the Church of Rome. If he did not do so it was because his faith was never ardent. In later years it abandoned him altogether. He was a tolerant Agnostic. In "De Profundis" he writes :—

"Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen I give to what one can touch and look at. My gods dwell in

temples made with hands. . . . When I think about religion at all I feel as if I would like to found an order for those *who cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless one might call it."

Another consideration which may have restrained him was that these reversions to Rome were much too common amongst Oxford undergraduates, and that the suspicion lurked in the minds of worldly men that in many cases they were simply caused by a desire for personal advertisement, a wish to do something different from others, to *épater les contemporains:* various motives which to a man of Oscar Wilde's good taste would appear eminently reprehensible.

Towards the very end of his life he often expressed the wish that he had sought refuge in the arms of the church which the spirit of Calvin does not infect. He is reported to have said more than once that if he had become a Roman Catholic when he was a young man he would never have fallen. He would certainly have suffered less at the hands of his new co-religionaries. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why those who inspire themselves from the teachings of Calvin—that is to say the very large majority of Englishmen and women—and who should therefore accept his doctrine of the predestina-

tion of man to sin, of the futility of striving against its promptings, should with greater ferocity than any other sect proclaim the entire responsibility of the man who has sinned, and exact from him the uttermost suffering that mortal penance can inflict.

" Nous tenons," writes Calvin, " que le péché originel est une corruption répandue par nos sens et affections en sorte que la droite intelligence et raison est pervertie en nous, et sommes comme pauvres aveugles en ténébres, et la volonté est sujette à toutes mauvaises cupidités, pleine de rébellion et adonnée au mal ; bref, que nous sommes pauvres captifs détenus sous la tyrannie du péché : non pas qu'en malfaisant nous ne soyons poussés par notre volonté propre, tellement que nous ne saurions rejeter ailleurs la faute de tous nos vices, mais pour ce qu'étant issus de la race maudite d'Adam, nous n'avons pas une seule goutte de vertu à bien faire et toutes nos facultés sont vicieuses."

It was the last act of friendship of a friend whose devotion to poor Wilde is the one beautiful thing in the terrible spectacle that humanity afforded in the final tragedy of that man's life, that on his deathbed Oscar Wilde was baptised into a kindlier creed than the one expounded above. Before the breath had left his body

pardon had entered into the death chamber; and to his friends remains the supreme consolation that shrived and sung he was carried to his grave. What would have been his obsequies if this friend had not been by his side at the last?

In 1877 an event took place in connection with which it may truly be said that "a new influence entered his life." This was his journey in Greece with the party which accompanied John Pentland Mahaffy. Of this journey it has been said that it contributed to make a "healthy Pagan" of the man who was hesitating whether to join the Church of Rome. Wilde himself declared that the lesson he learned during his travels in Hellas was that it was very right for the Greek gods to be in the Vatican. "Helen," he declared, "took precedence of the *Mater Dolorosa*; the worship of sorrow gave place again to the worship of beauty." It is very much to be doubted whether for these fine phrases there was any foundation whatever in fact; whether the relative claims of Paganism and of Catholic Christianity ever troubled the young traveller's head at all. The influence to which reference is made above was much simpler and much more important. It was the result that might have been expected when an impres-

sionable lad, deeply read in classical literature, received visual evidence of the actual existence of the beautiful things of which he had read. For the first time the true call of the Parthenon would reveal itself to his ears. Things which had been in his mind but words, words, words, became tangible and living realities. It was then, no doubt, that for the first time his true enthusiasm for Beauty was aroused. It could hardly be otherwise seeing in whose company he was privileged to travel, and who the man was who was at his side to expound to him the marvels that Greece unfolds at every step. The full account of this journey in Greece is given in Professor Mahaffy's wonderful book, "Rambles in Greece," which was one of the favourite books of Monsieur Ernest Renan. Those who are interested in Oscar Wilde should not fail to read this book carefully, for though it bears no reference to his name, every page of it is significant to the man who tries to form a just appreciation of his extraordinary character. It allows one to assert without fear of contradiction that after his return from Greece, his apostolate in the cause of Beauty was no longer dictated by a sense of opportunism. Many writers allude to the wonderful beauty of ancient times, but for the most part their writings have the stamp of

artificiality. When Oscar speaks of the beauty, for instance, of a Tanagra statuette he knows what he is talking about. In many minds the suspicion lurks that in everything on which he wrote and spoke he was apt to use words which had a fine sound and which conveyed an artistic suggestion so as to create an impression of his knowledge. It has been thought that the catalogues of Museums, the price-lists of jewellers and other artificers lay at his hand when he was writing, so as to enable him to heap up dazzling piles of coruscating words, which to him were words and nothing else. Zola practised this deception, and so did Victor Hugo, but never Oscar Wilde in his references to classical antiquity. Take the example quoted above. He frequently refers in his writings, as he frequently referred in his talk, to Tanagra statuettes. Those who ever proclaimed the man an impostor have been heard say that of Tanagra statuettes he knew no more than any man who has access to dictionary or encyclopædia. Now, during the many days that he spent in Athens with Professor Mahaffy and his friends, the Museums at Athens were sedulously visited, and particular attention seems to have been paid to these statuettes, which in 1877 had only recently been unearthed in Tanagra in Boeotia. With what

attention "these little figures of terra cotta, often delicately modelled and richly coloured both in dress and limbs" were then studied appears very clearly from Mahaffy's book. In Chapter III. of the "Rambles in Greece," under the heading, "Athens—The Museums," we find several pages devoted to a learned and interesting description of these *figurines*. There can be no doubt that on his return from Greece there was no man in England better entitled and better qualified to talk and write about Tanagra statuettes than Oscar Wilde. And the same proof could be given of the genuine knowledge which he possessed of all the other beauties of antique times. When, during the visit to Paris in 1883, he was heard to say that he had passed hours in the Louvre in admiration before the Venus of Milos, people shrugged their shoulders and charged him with posturing affectation. Anyone who reads Mahaffy's book, and thus gathers under what guidance Oscar's eyes were opened to the admiration of Greek statuary, by what teaching his critical sense of this form of Art was created and fostered, will understand that his sincerity could in no way be called into account any more than his profound knowledge of the subject. The man was steeped in the glories that were Greece. Those wonderful

passages in "De Profundis" in which he writes with such facility and eloquence of the classic days were inspired by no readings from a prison Lempriére. They came to him as naturally as came to him those other passages which refer to the horrors, commonplaces of the life which he was leading.

"For the Greek gods, in spite of the white and red of their fair fleet limbs, were not really what they appeared to be." Such are the opening words of a passage of great beauty which it can be maintained was written as simply and with no more straining for effect than, for instance, the passage beginning :

"I am completely penniless and absolutely homeless."

It is not possible here, although it would be of paramount scientific interest, to inquire too closely into the question whether with this awakening of enthusiasm for the beauties of antique Greece the latent tendency towards perversion was not also developed. If danger there be in a classical education to lads who have certain hereditary instincts and abnormalities of temperament, certainly no more powerful means for breaking down such resistance as religious education, training, and example might oppose could have been found

than this journey in Greece. That remarkable writer, Henri de Régnier, in his study of Oscar Wilde, which appears in his volume, "Figures et Caractéres," directly attributes his downfall to the fact that he had so steeped himself in the life of gone-by days that he did not realise the world in which he was actually living. The result would be that the laws of modern society would not restrain his powerful impulses. "Je n'insisterai pas sur les causes d'une pareille aventure," writes Henri de Régnier. "On les connaît. M. Wilde croyait vivre en Italie au temps de la Renaissance ou en Gréce au temps de Socrate. On l'a puni d'une erreur chronologique, et durement, étant donné qu'il vivait à Londres où cet anachronisme est, paraît-il, fréquent." There can be little doubt that the views enunciated above will by a more enlightened posterity be accepted in palliation of the things with which his name is so cruelly associated. That will be when men have attained to some scientific comprehension of mental pathology. At present even the pathology of the body is only just emerging from ignorance, superstition and charlatanism.

The delights of the tour in Greece were so great—how great they must have been will appear to anyone who reads Mahaffy's wonderful

book—that Oscar Wilde failed to return to Oxford by the date when it was required of him to do. The Dons of Magdalen fined him forty-five pounds for this breach of discipline. The money was, however, returned to him when in the following year he so greatly distinguished himself by taking a First Class in the "Honour Finals," and by winning the Newdigate Prize for English Verse. The poem which he sent in for this competition was a poem entitled "Ravenna." It is considered by many of Oscar Wilde's admirers as a very fine piece of work, and it certainly shows a tremendous advance on the work which is to be found in the magazines, to which reference has been made above. By a curious coincidence, in which the ancients might have seen a manifestation of the dread irony of the gods, a fortuitous circumstance had equipped him admirably for success in this poetical tourney. A triumph resulted; both he himself and his friends may have considered the circumstance a piece of rare good fortune. When we review his whole career we may ask ourselves if, indeed, it was for his happiness that this triumph was won, and that in consequence he turned with confidence to the pursuit of that career of letters which when it is pursued side by side with the quest of pleasure and excitement leads inevitably

to physical and mental ruin. The fortuitous circumstance referred to is described in the following terms by Mr Hamilton:—

"During a vacation ramble in 1877 he started for Greece. Visiting Ravenna by chance on the way he obtained material for a poem on that ancient city; and singularly enough 'Ravenna,' was afterwards given out as the topic for the Newdigate competition, and on the 26th June 1878 the Newdigate prize poem 'Ravenna' by Oscar Wilde of Magdalen, was recited in the theatre, Oxford." The poem was, as is usual, published by Messrs T. Shrimpton & Sons. The original edition is very rare, and high prices are obtained for copies. Many forged editions have been issued which can be distinguished from the original by the fact that on title and cover pages the University Arms are generally missing. The poem has been reprinted *in extenso* in Mr Mosher's collected edition of Wilde's poems, published in Portland, Mass.: a very beautiful volume.

The poem contains some beautiful lines, and anyone who remembers the extraordinary musical beauty of Oscar Wilde's voice will readily understand that, as is recorded in a contemporary account of the recital of "Ravenna" by its author, "it was listened to with rapt

attention and frequently applauded" by the crowded audience. Here are the opening lines:

"O lone Ravenna! many a tale is told
Of thy great glories in the days of old:
Two thousand years have passed since thou didst see
Cæsar ride forth to royal victory.
Mighty thy name when Rome's lean eagles flew
From Britain's isles to far Euphrates blue;
And of the peoples thou wast noble queen,
Till in thy streets the Goth and Hun were seen."

So far the listening competitors may have wondered at their defeat. Immediately afterwards, however, they would be forced to admit that a true poet had revealed himself.

"Discrowned by man, deserted by the sea,
Thou sleepest, rocked in lonely misery!
No longer, now upon the swelling tide,
Pine-forest like, thy myriad galleys ride!
For where the brass-peaked ships were wont to float,
The weary shepherd pipes his mournful note;
And the white sheep are free to come and go
Where Adria's purple waters used to flow."

How many of those who were present in the Sheldonian on that June afternoon and applauded the handsome youth as he recited in the most melodious of voices his effective lines realised that they were listening to what was a very allegory of the startling contrasts that were to mark the poet's life. Greatness was to come

to him, and upon greatness, desolation and lonely ruin were to follow. The man, though he knew it not, was telling the story of his own splendours to come, and of the misery that was to follow upon them.

CHAPTER VIII

Oscar Wilde in Masquerade—A Professor of Æsthetics—The Object Pursued—The Æsthetic Movement—Oscar Wilde's Siege of London—His Success and his Failure—The Testimony of an Eye-Witness—Society's Attitude towards him—Possible Explanation of this Attitude—Oscar Wilde's Repartee—Whistler in the same Dilemma—Wilde's Volume of "Poems"—the Dress of the Cinderella Muse—In what the "Poems" greatly triumphed—"Howell and James"—The Friendship of Edmund Yates—The Admiration and Regard of Sarah Bernhardt—The "Poems" and the Critics—The "Poems" and a Professional Humorist—The "Poems" in America—Oscar Wilde sails for the States—A Send-off in the "World"—What Oscar may have felt.

On 1st May in this year 1878 Oscar Wilde appeared at a fancy-dress ball at Headington Hill given by Mrs Morrell. He presented himself in the costume of Prince Rupert, and his fine and striking appearance was commented upon in the social chronicles of the time. For some period of his life subsequent to this event he was to be seen figuring in masquerade. Later on Society forced him to assume another *travesti*, which in its essential features was not dissimilar to the one he had assumed when he went up to London in the rôle of a "Professor of Æsthetics and Art critic," as Foster describes him in his *Alumni*

Oxonienses. The more one studies the lives of great men the more does the certitude impress itself upon one that our human destinies are ruled by a power of which a mocking irony is the prime characteristic. The ancients discovered it long ago ; the modern world is beginning to perceive it. For some part of his life Oscar Wilde masqueraded in defiance of Society, and then later on Society made him masquerade in defiance of himself.

An authoritative writer, who, however, throughout Oscar Wilde's career was his sternest critic and censor, declared at the time of his downfall that Oscar Wilde had been heard to explain that the reason why he assumed that costume which it pleased him to describe as the " æsthetic costume " was merely to attract attention to his personality. He adds that Oscar Wilde had said that for months he had tried in vain to find a publisher for his collected poems, and that having failed to do so, because he was an unknown man, he determined to make himself known, and had hit upon the device of appearing in public in an extraordinary dress. He adopted as the " æsthetic costume " a velvet coat, knee-breeches, a loose shirt with a turn-down collar, and a floating tie of some unusual shade, fastened in a *Lavalliére* knot, and he not

unfrequently appeared in public carrying in his hand a lily or a sunflower, which he used to contemplate with an expression of the greatest admiration. Let it be added to this that he wore his hair long, and was clean-shaven as to his face; and when it is remembered how striking a form and what memorable features were his already by Nature it will be understood what attention his appearance must have attracted. One might find other and more charitable explanations for this self-travesty; perhaps with all the more justification that commerical instinct does not appear to have been very strong in Oscar Wilde. He was a young man at the time; he was by nature and atavism inclined to *Schwaermerei*; he may have thought that the costume suited him; he may have wished to set Society at defiance at the prompting of that Anarchist spirit which was within him, as it is within all men who are really great. For the rest, whatever the man's motives were, that he gave effect to his plan shows that he possessed great moral courage. It is by no means every man who has the strength of mind to make a laughing-stock of himself in the eyes of London. The London *gamins* are pitiless; and on each of his walks abroad the young "æsthete" must have veritably run the gauntlet. It may further

be noted that many men and women of approved capacity have shown and do show this curious love of self-advertisement. It has always been the malady of the great ; in recent years it has grown into an epidemic. The advance of commercialism may account for it. Commercialism has made it clear that the only method by which a man can call attention to the excellence of his wares is by persistent puffery. Artists, actors, writers, philosophers and politicians have equally wares to sell—in this age every man who is not independent is a tradesman of sorts—and one can hardly blame them if they adopt the means for selling these wares which succeed in other branches of trade. The public, moreover, is gradually becoming so accustomed to these methods that far from regarding with suspicion the man of letters who by the eccentricity of his costume, the length of his hair, the frequency or the rarity of personal mentions and portraits of him which appear in the papers, is the carrier of his own advertising boards, the importunate distributor of personal leaflets, it gives more and more its exclusive attention to the person who most loudly shouts his wares. This is the case in England and America. In the Latin countries and in Germany where art is still regarded in

much the same light as religion these tricks would fail of their desired effect. But in England we are a commercial nation, and as Doctor Johnson never tired of pointing out to Boswell, we must be dealt with by commercial methods.

There is no call in this biography to give any extended description of that æsthetic movement in England with which Oscar Wilde for a short period of his life, and for motives which are not quite clear to us, associated himself. Anyone who is curious on the subject of one of those crazes which sent the British public once more into what Carlyle called a "bottomless abyss of delirium and confusion and nameless distraction"[1] should read Walter Hamilton's excellent and most interesting book: "The Æsthetic Movement in England," to which already frequent reference has been made, and from which material yet remains to be drawn. It is the work of a man who was not unsympathetic with the movement, and who had for the leaders and

[1] "Carlyle once observed to my father: Upon the whole, the British public, with its contagious enthusiasms, reminds me of nothing so much as the Gadarene swine. There they are quietly grubbing and grunting in search of what pignuts or other aliments may present themselves for their sustenance and comfort, when suddenly the devil enters into them, up go their tails into the sky, and away they go, plunging into bottomless abysses of delirium and confusion and nameless distraction" ("Random Reminiscences," by Charles H. E. Brookfield).

camp-followers of it esteem, admiration, or tolerance. And side by side with Mr Hamilton's book, the volumes of *Punch* for the years 1880-1883 may be turned over. It is from the satirist that one learns most of social life; and Juvenal and Saint Simon are the best historians.

"The Æsthetes," wrote Mr Hamilton, "are they who pride themselves upon having found out what is the really beautiful in nature and art, their faculties and tastes being educated up to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities; whilst those who do not see the true and the beautiful—the outsiders in fact—are termed Philistines."

Even at the height of the craze there was a very considerable proportion of the public in England which did not even know the meaning of the word æsthetic. It was usual enough to hear people express the surmise that as anæsthetic was something which sent you to sleep, an æsthetic must be something which. . . . The movement was generally associated with sunflowers, certain peculiar shades in pottery and tissues, a languid demeanour, and a certain angularity of furniture and attitude. The penalty for this craze is still being paid by an innocent posterity in the enormities of cheap and tawdry accessories which are forced upon

OSCAR WILDE.

"O, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower!"
Lays of Christy Minstrelsy.

Æsthete of Æsthetes!
What 's in a name?
The poet is WILDE,
But his poetry 's tame.

CARICATURE REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE PROPRIETORS OF "PUNCH."

the ignorant public by the manufacturers under the sacred name of Art, never so ruthlessly profaned. As usual, certain men who put themselves forward as active agents of the movement, of the reform, attained to popularity and wealth; certain tradesmen, commercial or self-styled artistic, emerged from poverty and obscurity by supplying the properties of the burlesque which England was enacting. The sincere men who had initiated all this enthusiasm remained, as usual, in the background, and continue to-day in the same serene solitude and silence the work they then began. For his part in popularising their theories—one might almost say in burlesquing them—Oscar Wilde derived a certain and wide notoriety, leaped into the public eye, found a publisher for his poems, and, in the event, engagements to lecture in the three kingdoms and in America. On the other hand, he started his artistic career amidst the suspicion of his contemporaries. This suspicion still clings to his name. The public memory is tenacious. The public mind does not readily accord to one man the right to play more than one part in life. It is diffident of versatility. Universality of genius it blankly refuses to admit. The funny man can never get people to take him seriously. Sydney Smith has described this. The Hanswurst must

be Hanswurst till the end of the chapter. There can be no doubt that Oscar Wilde's early eccentricities created an erroneous impression concerning his capacities which for years militated, and in certain quarters still militates against the reputation which his high genius entitled him to enjoy. Fame is not to be violated with impunity; and when the claims of the Pont d'Arcole were denied, could the peacock's feather and the sunflower prevail? The pose, such as it was, was eminently successful. If notoriety were sought after, it was gained to the fullest extent. *Punch* celebrates week in week out the eccentricities of the school. On the parts played in this circumstance by both Du Maurier and Burnand Mr Hamilton's most interesting book can be consulted.

There can be no doubt that all the time when Oscar Wilde was thus mumming and masquerading the bitterness at his heart was great. Knowing what was in him; feeling the flame of the genius that burned within; conscious of the part that he might have been playing on the stage of the world, to none more than to himself can his notoriety, acquired as it was and kept alive by such means, have appeared despicable and a matter for regret. At the same time it helped him to some extent to gain that *entrée*

into London society which when he left Oxford and went to the metropolis was his immediate object. The lion-hunters with which the capital abounds were not sorry to be able to produce at their tables and during their receptions the man about whom England was speaking, and of whom the comic papers made weekly sport. In this way he certainly achieved some part of his purpose, which, otherwise, might altogether have failed of effect. For in a world where the first question that is asked about a new-comer is: "What has he got?" and the next is: "Who is he?" the younger son of an Irish professional man, with the very smallest of incomes was doomed by the very nature of things to utter failure of his social ambitions. In addition to this the reputation of his brother Willy, who had preceded him to London, was already a damaging one; and there is no doubt that Oscar's subsequent animosity towards his brother was caused by his remembrance of the extent to which he had been a stumbling-block in his early path, when the conquest of social London was the aim of his endeavours. But for the curiosity which attached to his name it is certain that none of the doors through which he desired to pass would ever have opened before him. As it was, he had the moderate social success which

London accords *en passant* to those who can divert its stagnant ennui. But he was never popular in society ; he was mistrusted and misunderstood ; and in the end he was disliked. His superiority was too crushing. The men and women who gathered round him wishing to laugh had the disagreeable surprise of finding that the buffoon's bladder was weighted with lead, and that the point of his wit left an intolerable sting behind it. A letter is in existence written by a lady who belongs to the highest English nobility, and who saw him in those early days in London. She appreciated his qualities to the full, but she also was forced to admit that as far as winning the suffrages of what is known as good society in London he failed utterly.

" I knew him," so runs the letter, " first at a Huxley dinner, just after he left Oxford. I was then old enough to be his mother, but I thought I had never met so wonderful and brilliant a creature. . . . Even you," she adds, addressing the person to whom this letter was written, " seem hardly to know how the ordinary run of English society *hated* him. I was never allowed to ask him to our house. How unconscious he must have been of this hatred when he thought that society would stand by him. . . . Poor

thing, that he should have represented an aristocrat to the howling crowd is most curious."

One has to remember that England is a commercial country where worth, merit, character, quality, genius are estimated only by the amount of money which a man earns or possesses. The only poet who is allowed to show consciousness of superiority is the poet who can show from royalties earned by his books an income superior to that enjoyed by the people whom he wishes to impress with his superiority. Our novelists rank according to the amount of shillings or pounds they receive per thousand words. In England the poor man is not allowed to show pride. Assumption of superiority which in the man of genius is inevitable is resented in English society when that man of genius is not able to show the actual cash value of his talents. That the younger son of a Dublin oculist, who was reported to have a bare two hundred a year, derived from land in Ireland, should try to impress London society; should show superiority and act with arrogance, was such an offence against the first precepts of English Society and the Church of England catechism that the hatred and indignation of his contemporaries can only be too readily believed. It requires a man more versed in psychology than is the ordinary man

of the world to understand that a man of genius is proud *because he is conscious of his superiority, because he cannot help but feel this superiority, and feeling it cannot help but show it*, guard himself against this as carefully as he may. When André Chenier waiting his turn at the guillotine struck his head against the uprights of the instrument of punishment and infamy and cried out : " And yet there were great things here ! " the mob roared with laughter. The mob always laughs when the man whom it has degraded yet claims any kind of pre-eminence. Oscar Wilde in these early days of the attempted Conquest of London displayed a pride which impressed the onlookers as arrogance. He figured as the *maître ;* he assumed the office of arbiter, and he was, perhaps, too young and inexperienced to carry the burthen of the part. He used to relate with some gusto certain of the retorts which he had made during this period. They display that quality which Rabelais describes as *outrecuidance*, which where it does not subjugate excites inextinguishable enmity. One of these stories also shows his readiness of repartee. One day arriving very late at a luncheon party his hostess mildly remonstrated with him for the delay, pointing to the clock in support of her rebuke. " And what, madam," he answered,

" do you think that that little clock knows of what the great golden sun is doing ? " The retort was an able one; but none the less would that hostess feel that as an excuse for her burned *entrées* and the inconvenience of her other guests; it was hardly the *amende honorable* which she was entitled to expect, and in her heart there would be a feeling of grudge against the wit. This anecdote enables one to institute a comparison between the readiness and powers of repartee of Oscar Wilde and the same qualities in that rival of his, Whistler. Whistler has always been considered as far superior in this respect to Oscar Wilde, and tourneys of repartee are quoted in which invariably the younger man was defeated. Yet on a similar occasion, Whistler, arriving late for lunch and being chidden therefore, found nothing better to do, or to say, than to fix his eyeglass firmly in his eye, to stare around the room and to cry, " Ha ! Ha ! Lunch ! Lunch ! Lunch ! Bunch ! Bunch ! Bunch ! " The hearers laughed and found the wit divine; but when the thing had crystallised it must have appeared to the hostess even a more pitiful excuse than the one which had been tendered by Oscar Wilde.

During his early years in London Oscar Wilde did not live with his mother and Willy. He

occupied lodgings in unfashionable districts. For some months he lived in a couple of furnished rooms in Salisbury Street, off the Strand, in the very Bohemia of letters. It was not till later that he moved to Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, which was his address during the last period of his bachelor days. His income was a very small one, and the struggle to figure as a man of the world was constant. By mortgaging and selling his property in Ireland, by the help of friends and by anonymous literary work, he was just able to maintain himself. If hopes of wealth ever came to him they proceeded from the fact that a rich friend, a lady, had bestowed upon him a large quantity of shares in Keeley's Perpetual Motion Engine, a fraud in which she had invested very largely, and in which she had the greatest confidence. At one time when Oscar's name was most prominently before London as the darling of London society his entire assets consisted of a sheaf of these worthless green papers.

If his desire in assuming the masquerade of the " æsthetic costume " was to influence a publisher to accept the risk of printing his poems, success here, at least, awaited him. He found in David Bogue, who was at that time in business as a high-class publisher in St Martin's Lane, a

commercial man ready to produce his book in the best style. In the *Athenæum* for 2nd July 1881 the book was announced in the following terms :—

Now ready. Crown 8vo. Price 10*s.* 6*d.*

POEMS. By OSCAR WILDE

PRINTED ON DUTCH HANDMADE PAPER AND HANDSOMELY BOUND IN PARCHMENT

This advertisement to anyone who knows the difficulties that the young aspiring poet has in finding a publisher for his works is a plain certificate of success. The price at which the volume was offered, the paper on which it was printed, and the parchment in which it was bound are all so many tributes to the skill with which the young man had impressed his personality on business London. It is not in this livery—this court dress rather—that the Cinderella Muse goes to the Palace of Fame, unless, indeed, a fairy godmother has intervened.

The irony of things shows itself once more on this page of the *Athenæum*. As one glances down the list of David Bogue's announcements one notices among the other new books which he was issuing at the same time as Oscar Wilde's poems the following works: "Music and

Morals," by Haweis; "Conscious Matter," by W. Stewart Duncan; and (here one can almost perceive the sardonic laughter of the immortals) "How to Make the Best of Life," by J. Mortimer Granvile.

This volume of poems consisted mainly of reprints of verses which Oscar Wilde had contributed to various periodicals, *Kottabos*, *The Dublin University Magazine*, *The Irish Monthly*, and certain London periodicals and journals. After leaving Oxford he had published poems in different weekly and monthly papers. Edmund Yates, who had a great esteem for him, and was always his literary and social protector, had opened to him the pages of *Time* and the columns of *The World*. Much of his most effective verse had appeared in *The World*. Of these poems, which have now been reprinted, and are open to the judgment, nothing need be said in criticism in this place beyond the fact that they appealed very strongly to the public of the day, and that four editions were readily sold in a few weeks. Many found great delight in them. The great and beautiful Ellen Terry, to whom the young poet dedicated two of the sonnets in this book, was charmed by his tributes; and what better success could a poet desire than having hymned Ellen Terry to win a smile of

approval from her lips? Of the two sonnets, "To Portia," and "To Queen Henrietta Maria," which appeared in this book, the one which gave most pleasure to the wonderful and great-hearted artist to whom they were addressed was the latter. This is it :—

QUEEN HENRIETTA MARIA

In the lone tent, waiting for victory,
She stands with eyes marred by the mists of pain,
Like some wan lily overdrenched with rain,
The clamorous clang of arms, the ensanguined day,
War's ruin and the wreck of chivalry
To her proud soul no common fear can bring,
Bravely she tarrieth for her Lord, the King,
Her soul a-flame with passionate ecstasy.
O Hair of Gold! O Crimson Lips! O Face!
Made for the luring and the love of man,
With thee I do forget the toil and stress,
The loveless road that knows no resting-place,
Time's straitened pulse, the soul's dread weariness,
My freedom and my life republican.

This sonnet then achieved what many sonnets of far greater beauty have failed to achieve. It appealed to the lady to whom it was inscribed. It is still remembered as a tribute by one upon whom tributes have been rained down like the dew of heaven. For the rest this supreme artist like many other of the greatest women of the day has always had admiration for the poet and pity for the man. In the spring of 1905

while England was still wondering whether it would be right and seemly to pronounce the name of the man who, although he had written "De Profundis," had yet ten years previously been convicted of conduct for which he had paid the utmost penalty of the law and the further penalty of some years of lingering agony and a miserable death, at that time, then, Miss Terry had the courage, speaking publicly at Frascati's at a meeting of the Gallery First Nighters' Club, to include the name of Oscar Wilde amongst a list of men whom she used to see at the Lyceum in the old triumphant days. "In the gallery and pit at the dear old Lyceum," she said, "there used to be seen faces of many men who had won or were about to win distinction in the world—the Burne-Joneses; the Justin M'Carthys; Alfred Gilbert, the great sculptor; the late Oscar Wilde; the poet O'Shaughnessy." The reference was a courageous one; the act was worthy of the woman. Its quotation here serves another purpose. It enables us to gather that in the days when Oscar Wilde was writing his verse he was not a prosperous man. The young man whose circumstances force him to go to the pit or the gallery of the theatre *à la mode* will find difficulty in storming the fortresses of the British aristocracy. For the "limitless

No. 163.—Private Frith's View.—Members of the Salvation Army, led by General Oscar Wilde, joining in a hymn.

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ambition" of his, of which he used to speak as a young man, aimed at the very highest social success. The upper middle-class from which he sprung filled him with disdain. He used to speak with contempt of Bayswater as the stronghold of all that was common and vulgar, and to be avoided. "A Bayswater view of things"—he could find nothing more scathing than that. When in the end he found that the higher aristocracy, while willing enough to be amused by him, did not readily yield to his advances, he came to speak with some contempt of the old nobility. "They are nothing but exaggerated farmers," he used to say. Amongst the modern *souches* he had some acquaintances, and, perhaps, because of their greater affability, these found no more valorous defender than Oscar Wilde. It was an imprudent thing for anyone to venture to joke on the nobility of the big brewers, for he happened to have some friends among men who had risen to the ranks of the aristocracy by the ladder of heaped-up barrels of beer. It is a fact that social success always impressed Oscar Wilde. The man who made money and "got on" in life enjoyed his regard; for the failure he had nothing but abhorrence. Intimate friends of his have wondered to hear him speaking with praise of very

common fellows who by reason of a little commercial cunning had reached to reputation and prosperity. In this respect he was essentially a worldly man, and, so considered, one wonders whether the Anarchist doctrines to which he later yielded did not result from his vexation at the small amount of real social success to which he attained as a young man. In only a very few good houses in London was he taken seriously, or invited as an honoured guest. Literary history affords few more distressing pictures than these early years of Oscar Wilde, where we see a man of supreme superiority wasting his time and humiliating himself in running after the worthless favours of men and women so entirely his inferiors. In the artistic world, however, his success was incontestable. He enjoyed from an early age the friendship and approval of many men of high distinction. He was the associate of Whistler ; he sat at the feet of George Meredith ; he was the companion of the Pre-Raphaelites ; and he proclaimed a sympathy for Swinburne which the elder poet did not reciprocate.

In later life he did not often refer to these days, and when he did so it was to talk of the arcana of London rather than of its heights. He had anecdotes to tell of an extraordinary

man named Howell, who seems to have exploited the naïve Pre-Raphaelites in a pitiless and constant manner, and who had had many amusing passages of arms with Whistler. For the cleverness of this man Oscar Wilde seemed to have some admiration. He used to quote as a witty saying of Howell's a retort that he once made when a group of artists, anxious to get rid of him, had offered to pay his passage out to Australia. "Who," said Howell, "would go to Australia, if he had the money to go with?" He found that it was a very clever invention on the part of Howell, being asked one day by Whistler whether he had ever happened to ride in cab No. 1 in London to have answered: "No, but a few days ago I drove home in cab No. 2." He seems to have watched with poignant interest the career of that unfortunate artist Solomons, who, as Fate would have it, survived Oscar Wilde by some years, and died under circumstances not more tragic than those which attended the death of the man who used to express such pity for his terrible life. That even at the time when "Patience" had been running for some months and Bogue was announcing his poems at the price of half-a-guinea he had not imposed himself on true London society is made clear by a note which Edmund Yates, his friend,

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inserted in *The World* as a preliminary announcement of these poems. It appeared in the number for 6th July 1881, and runs as follows: "People who, hearing of Mr Oscar Wilde, ask who he is and what he has done, will now be able to learn, as a volume of Mr Wilde's collected poems will shortly be published." That Edmund Yates had a sincere admiration for Oscar Wilde will be all the more readily understood when it is recorded that many of Wilde's poems which appeared in *The World* had brought to the editor from different parts of the world letters of high commendation from the readers of that journal. One incident especially appealed to Yates. It came to his knowledge that a copy of *The World* containing Wilde's poem *Ave Imperatrix* had been received by a mess of British officers in one of the regiments which followed Lord Roberts on his march to Kandahar, and that these men had been struck with the truth and beauty of the picture which the poet had drawn of the very spot where they were encamped. Sarah Bernhardt's admiration for and friendship with the young poet would also impress that most Parisian of Londoners, Edmund Yates. Sarah always had a high regard for Oscar Wilde. She used to say that she had been charmed with the courtesy of his manner, and with his kindness of

heart. "Most men who are civil to actresses and render them services," she used to say, "have an *arrière-pensée*. It was not so with Oscar Wilde. He was a devoted attendant, and did much to make things pleasant and easy for me in London, but he never appeared to pay court." In other words Sarah had discovered amongst the young men of London one who was an English gentleman in every sense of that much misused term. And this may be put on record here once and for all. Oscar Wilde was the *beau idéal* of an English gentleman. That is to say the sane Oscar Wilde. What he may have been when his epileptiform fits took him it is for the outcasts to say who saw him on these rare and mournful occasions.

Oscar Wilde's volume of poems received with enthusiasm by the public found little favour with the critics. The book was roundly abused. *The Saturday Review*, which in those days had still some importance as an arbiter in literature, contemptuously disposed of the book in a few sentences at the end of an article on "Recent Poetry." This review appears in the number for 23rd July 1881. It begins: "Mr Wilde's verses belong to a class which is the special terror of the reviewers, the poetry which is neither good nor bad, which calls for neither praise nor

ridicule, and in which we search in vain for any personal touch of thought or music." Lower down, "The great fault of all such writing as this is the want of literary sincerity which it displays. For instance, Mr Wilde brings into his verse the names of innumerable birds and flowers, because he likes the sound of their names, not because he has made any observation of their habits. He thinks that the meadow-sweet and the wood-anemone bloom at the same time, that that shy and isolated flower, the harebell 'breaks across the woodlands in masses,' 'like a sudden flush of sea,' and that owls are commonly met with in mid-ocean." Strong exception is next taken to the sensual tone of the poems, and the review concludes with the following: "This book is not without traces of cleverness, but it is marred everywhere by imitation, insincerity, and bad taste."

This reviewer was no doubt sincere, for we find in his comments the repetition of much that, so far, we have heard raised up in blame against the young poet. We have heard him spoken of as "an average sort of man"; we know that his educational weakness was a neglect of the rudiments—in this case he is blamed for a lack of the botanical and zoological rudiments;

and we have already seen him charged with imitation of others. Moreover, he is here once more rebuked for that imprudent manner of his of talking about the physical beauties of man and woman which later on was to render him such signal disservice. It was a habit gained from his classical training and his enthusiasm for the literature of the ancients ; but it was a literary habit which in modern days was fraught with considerable danger.

The Athenæum gave him the place of honour in its number for 23rd July 1881. The long review of his poems occupied its first page. The review is a very careful one, well-written, as are all the reviews in that periodical which stands first amidst the critical papers of the world. It was evidently the work of a man who was not biassed either for or against the young poet, and who had very conscientiously prepared himself for his task as the critic of the book. The review was an unfavourable one. It begins : " Mr Wilde's volume of poems may be regarded as the evangel of a new creed. From other gospels it differs in coming after, instead of before, the cult it seeks to establish." " We fail to see however," continues the reviewer, after an exposition of Oscar Wilde's teachings, " that the apostle of the new worship has any distinct

message." Lower down, "Turning to the execution of the poems there is something to admire. Mr Wilde has a keen perception of some aspects of natural beauty. Single lines might be extracted which convey striking and accurate pictures. The worst faults are artificiality and insincerity, and an extravagant accentuation of whatever in modern verse most closely approaches the *estilo culto* of the sixteenth century." An able and scientific, if not very charitable, *requisitoire* bearing out the charges in this indictment follows. The charge of imitation is particularly insisted upon.

"The sonnet on the 'Massacres of the Christians in Bulgaria' reflects Milton's sonnet on the 'Massacres in Piedmont.' The 'Garden of Eros' recalls at times Mr Swinburne—at times Alexander Smith. In the descriptions of flowers which occur in the poem last named there is a direct and reiterated imitation of Shakespeare.

> 'Some violets lie
> That will not look the gold sun in the face
> For fear of too much splendour'—

reminds one of the

> 'Pale primroses
> That die unmarried ere they can behold
> Bright Phoebus in his strength.'

Mr Wilde's

> 'Budding marjoram, which but to kiss
> Would sweeten Cytheræa's lips'—

and his

> 'Meadow-sweet
> Whiter than Juno's throat'

brings back the

> 'Violets dim,
> But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
> Or Cytheræa's breath.'

And the 'rustling bluebells'—rustling bluebells is a vile phrase—that come

> 'Almost before the blackbird finds a mate,
> And overstay the swallow'

are but the daffodils

> 'That come before the swallow dares.'

"Traces of this kind of imitation abound, and there is scarcely a poet of high mark in the present century whose influence is not perceptible."

The conclusion is not an inspiring one: "Work of this nature has no element of endurance, and Mr Wilde's poems, in spite of some grace and beauty as we have said, will, when their temporary notoriety is exhausted, find a place on the shelves of those only who hunt after the curious in literature. They may, perhaps, serve

as an illustration in some chapter on the revival in the nineteenth century of the Gongorism of the sixteenth."

Against the charge of imitation Wilde's warmest friends will not be able—were they desirous of so doing—to defend him. He was essentially an artist, and the artist is essentially imitative. Art is imitation. The only original creation which is not the reproduction of anything else of which we know is the creation of the world, and on that circumstance the data are too vague for us to be quite certain that here too imitation did not overhang the labour. Models were certainly not lacking, or the astronomers have misled us. There has never been a writer yet against whom charges of plagiarism have not been brought. Of those charges Molière briefly and wittingly exonerated himself. Molière was in the right. The artist is entitled to appropriate for his own treatment the thoughts, the conceptions of others. It is not the highest form of literary art, but it gives pleasure, and it is a tribute to the man from whom the borrowing took place. It seems that it would be as unfair to say that a *prima donna* who sings us the Jewel Song out of "Faust" ought not to be listened to because we have heard other *prime donne* sing that song before she came upon the stage. It is one of

the most detestable axioms of commercial Philistinism that the exclusive right in a thought or a comparison belongs to the man who first voiced them. In the Republic of Letters and amongst true artists no such proprietary instinct prevails. It is the true artist's greatest joy to feel that he has given forth fecundating atoms which shall breed beauty in ages to come.

Most of the reviews were equally unfavourable. In some, private enmity was allowed to show itself. The notice which appeared in *Punch* may be humorous, it is certainly not marked with courtesy. As a specimen of the kind of criticism of himself, which Oscar Wilde had provoked, some extracts from this notice may be quoted. It commences thus :—

" Mr Lambert Streyke in *The Colonel* published a book of poems for the benefit of his followers and his own ; Mr Oscar Wilde has followed his example." As Mr Hamilton points out, the character of Lambert Streyke, in Burnand's adaptation *The Colonel*, is that of a paltry swindler, who shamming æsthetic tastes imposes upon a number of rather silly ladies, and is finally exposed by *The Colonel*.

The review continues : " The cover is consummate, the paper is distinctly precious, the binding is beautiful, and the type is utterly too.

'Poems,' by Oscar Wilde, that is the title of the book of the æsthetic singer, which comes to us arrayed in white vellum and gold. There is a certain amount of originality about the binding, but that is more than can be said for the inside of the volume. Mr Wilde may be æsthetic, but he is not original. This is a volume of echoes, it is Swinburne and water, while here and there we notice that the author has been reminiscent of Mr Rossetti and Mrs Browning."

The poems were commercially a great success, and this success pleased Oscar Wilde very much. He used to speak with pride of the fact that his volume of poems had run into four editions in as many weeks. For the rest, as his powers developed he came to look upon this early work in the light of a *peché de jeunesse*. Certainly the author of "Keats' Love-letters" and other of his later poems could not help but be critical towards the verse contained in this volume. Yet such as it is it has outlived the various periods of notoriety which brought their author's name so prominently before the world. Recently republished in America by Mr Mosher of Portland a large and constant demand for the book continues.

Already at the time of its original publication the American edition met with great success. In

a paragraph in *The World* for 9th November 1881 we read: "Mr Oscar Wilde has arranged to leave England next month for America where he will deliver lectures on Art subjects. Mr Wilde's volume of poems, which has had a very large sale in America, will have prepared the way for him and no doubt insured him a brilliant reception in that country. I hear that Mr Wilde is also making arrangements for bringing out an original play before he leaves London." The play here referred to is "Vera," a Nihilist drama. It was not produced until much later in America, where it met with instant failure. The great objection to the play was the fact that it contains only one female role, that of Vera, the Nihilist heroine. This drama has been printed, and can be obtained in London, with various annotations.

It was not, as amiably represented by Edmund Yates, as the author of a successful volume of poems that Oscar Wilde received encouragement to go to America to lecture. It was suggested to him that a good deal of curiosity existed in that country in "the Æsthetic Movement and School," that his personality aroused interest, and that a profitable lecturing campaign might be carried out there. At the same time he was anxious to produce "Vera," which he had not

been able to place upon the stage in London. He had no arrangement with any *impresario* when he left England. Major Pond afterwards undertook to "run him" in the States; that is to say after his appearance at the Chickering Hall and his success there.

He sailed on board the *Arizona* on Saturday, 24th December 1881, his original intention being to deliver one lecture on the "Recent Growth of Art in England," and he proposed to be absent for three or four months. A few days before his departure there appeared in *The World*, under the heading "The Lights of London," a sketch of him by H. B., described as "Ego Upto Snuffibus Poeta," with certain humorous verses attached, of which the following may be quoted:

"Albeit nurtured in democracy
And liking best that state Bohemian
Where each man borrows sixpence and no man
Has aught but paper collars; yet I see
Exactly where to take a liberty.
Better to be thought one, whom most abuse
For speech of donkey and for look of goose,
Than that the world should pass in silence by.
Wherefore I wear a sunflower in my coat
Cover my shoulders with my flowing hair
Tie verdant satin round my open throat,
Culture and love I cry, and ladies smile,
And seedy critics overflow with bile
While with my Prince long Sykes's meal I share."

The parody meant to be friendly, but there can be no doubt that it aroused bitter feelings of self-reproach in Oscar Wilde's mind. Of self-reproach, but also of indignant revolt against the order of things which in these modern days condemns a man of action to inactivity, who, if he would emerge from the stagnant obscurity to which the world condemns him, must play the part of pantaloon. Vital, full of genius and of that physical energy which is the genius of the body, fitted for any part that the world has ever yet bestowed upon a man, he found himself at twenty-seven years of age crossing the Atlantic in masquerade, to amuse, to be laughed at, and in his bitter humiliation to appear to take pleasure in the part. In the whole of his mournful career few periods can have been more full of suffering. We reach here the heights of tragedy to which Shakespeare attains in "King Lear." Higher heights, for the king was here a youth. We are to remember too that the man was a man of genius, and that being so he could not help but know it.

CHAPTER IX

Oscar Wilde's Remark about the Atlantic—He is Interviewed —His Personal Appearance—Alleged Resemblance to Irving—Oscar Wilde and the Actors—How Irving once recalled Wilde's look—Oscar's Lecture at the Chickering Hall—The Opinion of New York—Oscar Wilde at Boston —The Harvard Students—A *Fiasco* of Burlesque—The Gentleman and the Boors—Boston's Tribute to the Gentleman—His Lecturing Tour—His Varied Fortunes—Different Impressions of Oscar Wilde—Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman—Oscar Wilde's Kindness—His Efforts on behalf of an English Friend—He Rescues a Starving Chicago Sculptor—Oscar Wilde and the Moncton Y.M.C.A.—The Bunco Steerers—American Dry Goods—"Robert Elsmere" as a Top-Dressing—The Production of "Vera"—A Paragraph in *Punch*—What America did for Oscar Wilde.

THE next thing that London heard about Oscar Wilde was that on arriving in New York he had declared himself disappointed with the Atlantic. This remark of his was seized upon by his critics as a further proof of the man's intolerable conceit and arrogance. As a matter of fact it was the very simple expression of the feeling with which most people who cross the Atlantic for the first time look back on the passage when that voyage has been performed during fine weather. One expects a tumultuous sea, a succession of awe-inspiring spectacles, great heights, and abysmal

depths of surging waters; and, when the sea is calm—well, it is calm. The man could not say the simplest thing without exciting malevolent criticism.

Before he landed Oscar Wilde was, as is usual in America with visitors of distinction, "interviewed" by various reporters who had come out to meet the *Arizona*. The report which appeared in the *New York Herald* gives, as he himself declared, the best account of what he said, and may therefore be reproduced here.

"Men may come and men may go, but it is not every day that an apostle (thwaite) of æstheticism comes to the shores of America. It was for this reason that the *Herald* reporter met Mr Oscar Wilde at the first available place—namely, quarantine.

"Mr Wilde was not at all adverse to the American process of interviewing, and began by informing the reporter that he had come to the United States 'to lecture on the *Renaissance*' which he defined as the 'revival of the intimate study of the correlation of all the arts.'

"'I shall lecture,' said Mr Wilde, a little reservedly, 'in Chickering Hall on the *Renaissance*. My future movements will depend entirely upon the results of my lecture in a business

sense. I have come here with the intention of producing upon the American stage a play which I have written, and which I have not, for reasons, been able to produce in London. It is exceedingly desirable that it should be produced with a cast of actors who shall be thoroughly able to represent the piece with all the force of its original conception.'

" ' But,' said the reporter, ' do you not intend to produce a volume of poems while you are in America ? '

" ' No, I shall not, certainly for some time to come, publish another volume, but I hardly care to say what the future may develop.'

" ' You will certainly lecture, however ? ' said the reporter.

" ' I certainly shall, but I do not know if I shall lecture in other cities besides New York. It will depend entirely upon what encouragement I find in the acceptance of my school of philosophy.'

" ' Do you, then, call " æstheticism " a philosophy ? ' asked the reporter.

" ' Most certainly it is a philosophy. It is the study of what may be found in art. It is the pursuit of the secret of life. Whatever there is in all art that represents the eternal truth is an expression of the great underlying truth. So

far æstheticism may be held to be the study of truth in art.'

" ' Æstheticism,' said the reporter, ' has been understood in America to be a blind groping after something which is entirely intangible. Can you, the exponent of æstheticism, give an interpretation which shall serve to give a more respectable standing to the word ? '

" ' I do not know,' said Mr Wilde, ' that I can give a much better definition than I have already given. But whatever there has been in poetry since the time of Keats, whatever there has been in art that has served to devolve the underlying principles of truth ; whatever there has been in science that has served to show to the individual the meaning of truth as expressed to humanity—that has been an exponent of æstheticism.' "

And so the two augurs parted, and without a smile.

Of Oscar Wilde's personal appearance at the time of his landing in New York it may be recorded that when the late Sir Henry Irving arrived in America on his first visit to the States it was generally said that he much reminded people of Wilde. In Frederic Daly's monograph, " Henry Irving," we find the following passage in the chapter describing the reception

given to the great actor on his landing in New York :—

" But the only unkind thing said of Mr Irving on his arrival was that he resembled Mr Oscar Wilde. 'The figure was muscular, as the æsthete's was, and the face was long and a trifle like his ; but there was far more strength in it, and it was more refined and manly.' Thus there was a dash of bitterness in Mr Irving's first American cup, though the writer who commended the chalice to his lips was not without a desire to sweeten the draught."

At the time of Sir Henry's first visit to America, Oscar Wilde had not yet shown himself. He was still masquerading and mumming ; and if there is one person in the world for whom the hardworking and conscientious actor, the sincere artist, has a dislike, it is the man who acts, as an amateur, by grimace and posture on the stage of life. Oscar Wilde's worst enemies were amongst the actors, and the spirit that prompted this resentment was not always the natural and excusable feeling that vexed Henry Irving when he, the conscientious artist, found himself compared to a man as to whom he did not then understand on what he based his claims to rank as an artist. The same feeling was shown by Coquelin the younger, who is of

modern actors one of the most hardworking, and in "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship" we find in this connection the following reference: "I had invited him to lunch with me at Paillard's to meet Coquelin cadet. . . . Coquelin cadet was not greatly impressed by my friend; and I imagine that, as a general rule, Oscar Wilde did not have much success with actors. These may have thought his affectation, harmless as it was, an infringement on their own rights—a trespass on their domain."

When catastrophe came upon him there were two actors who most zealously worked to complete his downfall; but in both cases there was personal animosity.

It is difficult to trace any resemblance between Oscar Wilde in 1881 and Henry Irving some years later. Yet, on one occasion, one who knew both men did notice the most striking and extraordinary likeness. This man was attending one night the performance of the "Lyons Mail" in the beautiful Prince of Wales' Theatre in Birmingham. In the scene where Lesurques, having been denounced by the witnesses from the inn, makes his pathetic appeal to one of the women to speak the word which admitting her mistake shall absolve him from the horrible charge which has been brought against him,

and the witness turns mournfully but resolutely away, Lesurques' face assumed a look of agony and horror, as the vista of what lay before him opened out—a look in which the blood rushed to the face and made it turgid and vultuous, there was at the same time a distending of the eyeballs, which seemed about to leap from their sockets, a twisting and contortion of the mouth roughly kneaded into a mass of agony by torturing hands, while the face lengthened as though by two crushing and simultaneous blows on each cheek it had been flattened downwards. The look of unspeakable anguish and dismay was cast sideways at the woman in whose silence Lesurques read his ruin, shame, and death. The spectator to whom reference has been made fell back in his chair from excess of emotion at the sight of a piece of acting so consummate. At that moment Irving presented the exact facial picture of Oscar Wilde, as looking sideways at the foreman of the jury from his place in the dock in the Old Bailey he listened to the verdict that meant to him ruin, shame, and death.

The lecture at Chickering Hall was a great success. We read in the *New York World* the following account of Oscar Wilde's *début* before the American public :—

" It is seldom that Chickering Hall has con-

tained so fine an audience as that which gathered there last evening (Monday, 9th January 1882) to see Mr Oscar Wilde, and to listen to his exposition of those peculiar views which have distinguished him from everyday folk in England. And Mr Wilde was well worth seeing, his short breeches and silk stockings showing to even better advantage upon the stage than in the gilded drawing-rooms, where the young apostle has hitherto been seen in New York. No sunflower, nor yet a lily, dangled from the button-hole of his coat; indeed, there is room for reasonable doubt as to whether his coat had even one button-hole to be put to such artistic use. But judging his coat by the laws of the Philistines it was a well-fitting coat and looked as though it had been made for the wearer as a real coat and not as a mere piece of decorative drapery. Promptly at eight o'clock the young lecturer came upon the stage, and with the briefest possible introduction from Colonel Morse Mr Wilde began his lecture."

In the New York review, *The Nation*, appeared at the end of that week a long article analysing the lecture and giving the impressions of the audience.[1] It was written by a representative man, who admits at the very outset of his re-

[1] Reprinted in the Appendix.

marks that Oscar Wilde's lecture was a success. Yet his conclusion was that "Mr Wilde was essentially a foreign product and can hardly succeed in this country. What he has to say is not new, and his extravagance is not extravagant enough to amuse the average American audience. His knee-breeches and long hair are good as far as they go ; but Bunthorne has really spoiled the public for Wilde."

He was not taken seriously by many. An intimate friend of his relates that the only reference which he ever heard Oscar Wilde make to the coarse things of life was in connection with this lecture. "As soon as it was over," he said, "a number of fashionable young men who had been present, and who met me at the club to which I went that night, wished to take me out to the night-houses of New York. 'Of course,' they said, 'after lecturing on Art and Culture, you will want to go and see the girls.'"

From a commercial point of view the lecture was a decided success, and at once a proposal was made to Oscar Wilde by that enterprising lecture-agent, the late Major Pond, who offered to "run him" for a series of lectures through the States. It has been generally understood that this series of lectures was very successful, that Oscar Wilde's progress through the States

was a triumphant one, and that the venture resulted in great financial benefit to himself and his *impresario*. Major Pond, however, himself stated, during his last visit to England and at a time when he had visited Hall Caine at Greeba Castle to endeavour to persuade the novelist to undertake a lecture-tour under his management, that Oscar Wilde's lectures had not been successful, and that he had abandoned the tour before the entire list of towns arranged for had been visited. This statement was made, however, at a time when everybody who had anything to say in detriment to Oscar Wilde was only too ready to give utterance to it. At the same time the Major was speaking to two men whom he knew to be friends of Wilde—which allows it to be supposed that he was speaking the truth; and another thing is that Major Pond had been speaking very freely about the different men whom he had "run," and the financial results which had been obtained.

The first town that Oscar Wilde visited after leaving New York was Boston, where from the very nature of the place and the bent of its inhabitants he might have been assured of a large and attentive audience. The audience was, indeed, large, but it was not a representative one. It was mainly composed of the curious who had

been attracted by the announcement that a number of Harvard students, dressed up in a burlesque of the "æsthetic costume," intended to be present, and most probably would "guy" the lecturer. A large audience congregated to see the fun, but the prominent Bostonians stayed away. The masqueraders waited until Oscar Wilde had stepped upon the platform, and then trooped in in single file, each assuming a demeanour more absurd than that of the man who followed him. There were sixty youths in the procession, and all were dressed in swallow-tail coats, knee-breeches, flowing wigs and green ties. They all wore large lilies in their button-holes, and each man carried a huge sunflower as he limped along. Sixty front seats had been reserved for the Harvard contingent, and it was amidst shouts of laughter that they filed into their places. The effect that they had wished to produce was, however, spoiled to some extent by the fact that Oscar Wilde had for that occasion discarded his peculiar costume and appeared in ordinary evening-dress, so that those of the audience to whom his usual appearance was not familiar entirely missed the point that the Harvard students wished to make. The young men behaved with little decorum. Though they did not "guy" the lecturer, whose counter-

manœuvre had somewhat abashed them, they took the opportunity of such pauses as occurred during the lecture when Oscar Wilde paused to drink water, to applaud in a most vigorous and derisive manner. Oscar Wilde, however, triumphed in the end, as an English gentleman always will triumph in a contest with boors. On the following day there appeared in that excellent paper, *The Boston Evening Transcript* (2nd February 1881) the following account of the lecture, which shows with what tact and success the young foreigner turned the tables on the men who had tried to discomfit him :—

" Boston is certainly indebted to Oscar Wilde for one thing—the thorough-going chastening of the superabounding spirits of the Harvard freshman. It will be some time, we think, before a Boston assemblage is again invaded by a body of college youths, massed as such, to take possession of the meeting. This is not unimportant, for if the thing should grow into a practice and succeed, anything in the way of public entertainments here must finally be done with the leave only of the youngest and most ill-bred class of Harvard students. Whether in his first off-hand observation, or in the pointed remarks scattered through his address, or in the story he told of the Oxford boys and Mr Ruskin, nothing

could have been more gracious, more dignified, more gentle and sweet, and yet more crushing, than the lecturer's whole demeanour to them, and its influence upon the great audience was very striking. A goodly number of the latter, it seemed to us, had gone there to see the fun, in hopes of a jolly row ; but the tide of feeling was so completely turned by Mr Wilde's courteous and kindly dignity that even this portion of the audience took sides with him, and hissed down every attempt on the part of the rougher element to disconcert or interrupt the speaker by exaggerated and ill-timed applause. Mr Wilde achieved a real triumph, and it was by right of conquest, by force of being a *gentleman* in the truest sense of the word. His nobility not only obliged *him*—it obliged his would-be mockers—to good behaviour. He crowned his triumph, and he heaped coals of fire upon those curly and wiggy heads, when he, with simplicity and evident sincerity, made them an offer of a statue of a Greek athlete to stand in their gymnasium, and said he should esteem it an honour if they would accept it. This really seemed to stun the boys, for they even forgot to recognise the offer with applause. It was a lovely though sad sight, to see those dear silly youths go out of the Music Hall in slow procession,

hanging their heads meekly, and trying to avoid observation, followed by faint expressions of favour from their friends, but also with some hisses. A lady near us said, 'How mortified I should be if a son of mine were among them!' We think that everyone who witnessed the scene on Tuesday evening must feel about it very much as we do, and that those who came to scoff, if they did not exactly remain to pray, at least, left the Music Hall with feelings of cordial liking, and perhaps, to their own surprise, of respect for Oscar Wilde."

"Courteous and kindly dignity": that was, perhaps, the trait in Oscar Wilde's character which won him such enthusiastic friendships, and so fervent a following of admirers.

The conduct of these Harvard lads was remembered at the time when it was the popular thing to heap abuse on Oscar Wilde, and in 1895 many of the baser American prints retold the story, but gave the *beau rôle* to the lads who had been so sorely discomfited. Some Rochester students who had imitated the pranks of Harvard also came in for commendation when to have flouted Oscar Wilde at any time in his career was supposed to entitle a man to social recognition and gratitude. But Rochester did not, in fact, come off any better in the encounter

between brains and manners with stupidity and boorishness than Harvard had done.

By his lecture and especially by his demeanour in the course of its delivery Oscar Wilde won many friends in Boston ; and that city of learning having set the seal of its high approval both on the lecturer and the lecture, the respectful attention of cultured Americans throughout the States was, at least, ensured to him. Some of the Boston ladies expressed the highest enthusiasm for the handsome young poet. Oscar Wilde's behaviour towards them only increased the respect with which he had come to be regarded.

" Oh, Mr Wilde," said to him at a reception by a young lady, " you have been adored in New York, but in Boston you will be worshipped."

" But I do not wish to be worshipped," said Oscar.

A circumstance which made for such success as he enjoyed during his lecture-tour was the support given by the Irish-Americans to the son of Speranza. Certain remarks in his lectures in which England and English society were scathingly criticised appealed strongly to this section of his audiences. " To disagree with three-fourths of all England on all points is one of the

first elements of sanity," is one of these remarks. But for the Americans, in general, there was such praise in some of his sayings as may have satisfied the almost morbid national self-conscientiousness of that country. "It is rather to you," he said, in the course of his lecture on the English *Renaissance*, "that we turn to perfect what we have begun. There is something Hellenic in your air and world. You are young; 'no hungry generations tread you down,' and the past does not mock you with the ruins of a beauty, the secret of whose creation you have lost. Love art for its own sake, and then all things that you need will be added to you." The Americans called this "taffy," but they liked it.

From Boston he went to Omaha, where he lectured on "Decorative Art." In the course of the lecture he described American furniture as "not honestly made and out of character." This remark may not have pleased his audience, but it was a plain expression of the truth, and that he made it shows that he had an observant eye, and even in the matter of household furniture could tell bad workmanship from good. Only last year there was published in London a book by J. Morgan Richards, one of the keenest American business men living, who speaking

about the various kinds of goods which American commerce had unsuccessfully tried to introduce into England, specially refers to American furniture, which he describes in almost the very words which the young æsthete used in his lecture in Omaha. When in an obituary notice of Oscar Wilde that wonderful writer, Ernest La Jeunesse, said of him, *Il savait tout* (he knew everything), he advanced a proposition which Oscar Wilde's admirers could support with numerous arguments and illustrations.

"Wherever he went in the States," says Mr Walter Hamilton, "he created a sensation, and it was gravely asserted that he had been induced to cross the Atlantic in order to work up an interest in "Patience," the *satire* of that opera not having been sufficiently understood in the States except by *reading* people. Such an idea had probably never entered his head; he is scarcely the man to condescend to become an advertising medium for a play which professes to ridicule nearly everything he holds sacred in art or poetry, but his visit did certainly have a most beneficial effect upon the success of the piece, which, beyond a certain point, had created little interest amongst middle-class Americans, whose ideas of culture are only awakened by an occasional visit to Europe." Mr Hamilton in his

commendable enthusiasm for Oscar Wilde is here rather too severe both on the middle-class Americans and on Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta. The middle-class Americans are certainly not lacking in culture; in this respect, indeed, they show themselves superior to the middle-classes of Europe. And as to "Patience" the main idea of that amusing and inspiriting piece is one which men have appreciated ever since stage-plays first existed. It is a theme which has been handled by most dramatists. It is Molière's *Tartuffe* treated in Gilbert's kindly and humane manner. It would appeal to anyone who had never heard of Oscar Wilde or of the "æsthetic movement." This slight *opera-bouffe* parodies in advance the great movement that is still going on in France—the struggle between the *intellectuels* and the military party. It is very much more than an *amusette*, though as such, thanks to Sullivan's delightful music, it takes the highest place amongst pieces of its kind.

Louisville was another city which he visited, and where he lectured on "Decorative Art." Some offence was taken here at his description of American houses as "illy designed, decorated shabbily, and in bad taste"; but on the whole the reception was a favourable one, and the local

papers were filled with flattering articles about the lecturer.

His experiences were varied. In some cities he had a fine welcome, and a large audience; in other places he was received with indifference, or even ridicule, and the takings at the door of the lecture-hall were not sufficient to cover Major Pond's expenses. At Denver he lectured to a very rough audience, and he used to relate that the week previously a man had been shot in the public room in which he lectured there, while he had turned his back on the crowd for the purpose of examining a chromo-lithograph. "Which shows," Oscar Wilde used to add, "that people should never look at chromo-lithographs."

"From the States he went to Canada, visiting Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, and Toronto; in the latter city he was present at a Lacrosse match between the Torontos and the St Regis Indians, which he pronounced a charming game, quite ahead of cricket in some respects. His lecture in the Grand Opera House, Toronto, was attended by 1100 persons, and wherever he went his movements and lectures created great interest."

"Charming" was at that time his favourite word to express his approval. Later on he

adopted the word "amazing" to describe anything very good. The opposite feeling was expressed by the word "tedious," which he retained till the end of his life.

He proceeded from Canada to Nova Scotia, lecturing at Halifax on 8th October 1882, and on the following day. The subjects of his lectures were "The Decorative Arts" and "The House Beautiful." The following account of his personal appearance was given by a writer in the Halifax *Morning Herald*, who prefaces his article by referring to the "winning and polite friendliness" with which he was received by Oscar Wilde.

"The apostle had no lily, nor yet a sunflower. He wore a velvet jacket which seemed to be a good jacket. He had an ordinary necktie, and wore a linen collar about number eighteen on a neck half-a-dozen sizes smaller. His legs were in trousers, and his boots were apparently the product of New York art, judging by their pointed toes. His hair is the colour of straw, slightly leonine, and when not looked after, goes climbing all over his features. Mr Wilde was communicative and genial; he said he found Canada pleasant, but in answer to a question as to whether European or American women were the more beautiful he dexterously evaded his

querist: "That I cannot answer here, I shall wait till I get in mid-ocean, out of sight of both countries. Your women are pretty, especially in the South, but the prettiness is in colour and freshness and bloom, and most of your ladies will not be pretty in ten years.'

"'I believe you discovered Mrs Langtry?' A look of rapture came to Oscar's face, and with a gesture, the first of the interview, he said: 'I would rather have discovered Mrs Langtry than have discovered America. Her beauty is in outline perfectly moulded. She will be a beauty at eighty-five. Yes; it was for such ladies that Troy was destroyed, and well might Troy be destroyed for such a woman.'"

He, on that occasion, expressed his opinion that Poe was the greatest American poet; and of Walt Whitman, he said that "if not a poet, he was a man who sounds a strong note, perhaps neither prose nor poetry, but something of his own that is grand, original and unique."

It would seem from the account of *The Morning Herald* reporter that Oscar Wilde during his Canadian tour had been dyeing his hair, for never at any time could its natural colour have been described as the colour of straw. It was of a peculiarly rich brown, a very beautiful colour, and it was opulent and abundant. During his

lecture-tours Oscar Wilde always carried a "make-up" box with him. As he was playing a part he seemed to feel that he might enlist all the advantages that actors assume. The reference to the absence of gestures on his part is interesting. This struck other people who met Oscar Wilde in the States, elsewhere than on the lecture-platform. Some people malevolently spoke of it as affected languor: one very prominent American statesman used to describe a visit he paid to Oscar in his hotel in Boston, where he found him lying on a sofa smoking cigarettes, and he said that he had been most unfavourably impressed by seeing a young man in such a state of "slackness." This gentleman who was a person of very great importance in the States seems to have expected to find Oscar Wilde "hustling" round his room. It did not occur to him, nor to the other people who blamed Oscar for affected languidness, that the exertion of lecturing to large audiences night after night, in addition to the filling of innumerable social engagements, might make it necessary for the young man to rest himself whenever opportunity to do so offered itself. Poor Oscar Wilde! The simplest things he did were turned into reproaches against him. For every act of his an evil motive was uncharitably devised.

One would fancy that he committed an unpardonable offence in ever coming into the world at all. He was accused of posturing on his very death-bed. What ferocity does great pre-eminence not arouse in the envious heart of man!

Some time after his visit to Halifax Oscar Wilde visited Walt Whitman. The meeting was not any more successful than was the meeting between him and Paul Verlaine. Oscar Wilde was "distressed" by the poverty of Walt Whitman's appearance, his shabby attire, and especially by the untidiness and squalor of the one room in which the American poet lived. The place was littered with great heaps of newspapers, for Walt Whitman collected everything that was printed about him, and these papers were strewn all over the room, and over them was so thick a coat of dust that it was impossible for any visitor to find a clean spot where to sit down. Walt Whitman, primæval, natural, aboriginal, would feel little sympathy for the dandified Hellene. One may think of a meeting between Alcibiades and Diogenes to understand the lack of sympathy that must have reigned during this memorable interview.

Oscar Wilde's great kindness of heart frequently manifested itself during this lecture-tour.

While in Philadelphia he made great efforts to find a publisher for an American edition of the poems of a friend of his, a young Oxford man, who since has come to very high honours, and whose verse was certainly of a very high order. But at that time the young poet was unknown, and the American publishers fought shy of the expense of publishing the volume. At last one firm agreed to produce the poems provided that Oscar Wilde wrote a preface to the verse. He at once agreed to do so, and the preface which he wrote is one of the finest pieces of prose that he had written up till then. The book was printed in lamentable style ; the notions of the publishers as to what constituted the " æsthetic decoration " of a volume were curious in the extreme ; and the English poet-friend felt himself aggrieved by Oscar Wilde. After receiving the book from America he wrote a letter to Oscar putting a period to their friendship, candidly stating that his political ambitions would be balked by its continuance, and particularly chiding him for having allowed his poems to be produced in a style which could only cover their author with ridicule.

Oscar Wilde's comment on this letter was characteristic : " What he says," was his only remark, " is like a poor little linnet's cry by the

side of the road along which my immeasurable ambition is sweeping forward." The poor man was not to know to what a goal of glory he was to reach, *per varios casus per tot discrimina rerum*. The frantic applause of the Dresden Opera-house fell short of the lonely grave in Bagneux cemetery.

On his arrival in Chicago, where he lectured afterwards to very large audiences, he received a letter at his hotel from a young Irish sculptor who told him of the misery in which he was living, of the anguish that he, an artist, who felt himself capable of great things, suffered to be slighted and ignored in such a city as Chicago, and begged him to come to the garret which was his studio and look at his work and give him the encouragement of his praise, if praise he could find to give. Directly after receiving this letter Oscar Wilde set out for the address given by the writer, and after a hazardous excursion into the slums of Chicago found John Donoghue's abode. He stayed with him for a long time, he praised his work, he comforted him, he told him the great consolation of *l'Art pour l'Art*, and he did not leave him without commissioning him to do a piece of work. The next evening John Donoghue sitting amongst the audience in the crowded lecture-hall suddenly heard Oscar Wilde

in the course of his lecture reproach the fashionable and distinguished men and women who were listening with rapt attention to his words with the fact that a young sculptor of undoubted genius who was living in their midst was being allowed by them in their ignorance and indifference to Art to die of hunger and that starvation which more rapidly kills the artist—the contemptuous neglect of the public. He went on to describe his visit to John Donoghue's studio ; he spoke of the beautiful things that he had seen there, of the beautiful things that this young man could do, of the honour which he could bring to the city of Chicago if only people would encourage his endeavours. The consequence was that next day John Donoghue was everywhere discussed in Chicago ; people flocked to his studio ; commissions poured in ; and after a very short while one of those munificent patrons of art who exist in America alone, as though Mæcenas had transmigrated to the States after the Fall of the Roman Empire, came forward with an offer to maintain the young man during a course of study in the *atéliers* of France and Italy. John Donoghue's artistic career was assured. He came to Europe, he studied, he prospered. But he was not a great man, nor was he a great artist. In Oscar Wilde's

adversity he had not a word of comfort to send him, but the circumstances of his own death seem to show that in his last days he reproaches himself for his ingratitude.

Mr Walter Hamilton describes a curious incident which occurred towards the end of Oscar Wilde's tour in Nova Scotia.

"After leaving Halifax, Oscar Wilde went to lecture in several smaller towns in Nova Scotia, amongst others to Moncton, where his experiences were of a somewhat unpleasant description, owing to a misunderstanding he had with a so-called Young Men's Christian Association; it arose thus:—Two committee men had been negotiating to secure him. The Y.M.C.A. committee telegraphed to Mr Wilde's agent, offering $75 for a lecture on Friday night. Mr Husted answered that the terms were satisfactory for Thursday night, and requested a reply. This was about 4 P.M. At about 8 P.M., four hours later, the Y.M.C.A. replied that Thursday night was satisfactory. Mr Wilde then replied in effect: 'Waited till 7, then had to close with other parties. Sorry.' Another committee of townspeople had in the meantime closed with Mr Wilde. Then the Y.M.C.A. obtained a writ which was served on Mr Wilde. The Y.M.C.A. laid damages at $200; Mr Husted offered to

give them $20 and pay costs. This was not accepted. Finally, Mr Estey and Mr Weldon gave their bonds for $500 for Mr Wilde's appearance. The action of the Y.M.C.A. is generally condemned in the colony, both by the very pious, who lift up their eyes and hands in pious horror at one who attempts to raise the love of Art and Beauty into a kind of religious worship ; and by the ungodly, who see that the Y.M.C.A. merely sought to fill its coffers out of the attraction of the Arch Prophet, irrespective of his teachings, and failing that, feed their revenge by attempts to levy blackmail."

The incident is worth recording, because it shows that Oscar Wilde's financial position towards the end of his lecturing-tour was such that he was not unwilling to accept the sum of £15 for travelling to a small town like Moncton and lecturing there, and that he had no objection to appearing under the auspices of a Young Men's Christian Association. It also shows that by this time Major Pond had determined his arrangement, for the name of Mr Wilde's agent appears to have been Husted.

Yet he did not return to New York without a substantial sum of money, and his mode of life there previous to his departure for Europe was

such that it attracted the attention of the New York flash men. Oscar Wilde fell into the hands of the "bunco steerers." He was actually involved into playing a game of poker with some affable gentlemen whose acquaintance he had made in a casual manner. They had introduced themselves to him as having attended his lecture in Boston with great edification to themselves. The result of the friendly game was what might have been expected. Oscar Wilde was cleared out of all the cash he had in his pocket, and when he left the table he had to give a cheque for a large amount on a New York bank to settle what he owed as losses. However, not long after he had left the house where he had been fleeced it occurred to him that he had simply been swindled, and promptly drove to the bank and stopped the cheque. The men, it appeared were notorious "bunco steerers."

During his visit to America his irony did not spare the Americans, and he gave utterance to a few remarks which would not make for his popularity amongst the people against whom they were aimed. Some of these sayings he afterwards used in his plays. He was, perhaps, proudest of having defined American dry goods as the productions of the American novelists. The American novelists *lui en ont gardé une dent.*

On a subsequent occasion he found everybody in the States reading "Robert Elsmere," and during a luncheon party in Dublin after his return from the States he described how in the trains every passenger seemed to have a cheap edition of this book in his or her hands. "As each page is finished it is torn out and flung through the window," he said, "So that in the end the American prairie will get a top-dressing of Robert Elsmere."

One disappointment had awaited Oscar Wilde in America; he was unable to find a manager who was prepared to produce "Vera," so that in his original purpose in going to America he was not successful. "Vera" was produced about a year later in New York at a trial evening, but badly mounted, badly played, it met with so unfavourable a reception that it was instantly withdrawn. It was not a good play in the sense of a stage piece. But it certainly merited to be spoken of with more respect than in the following paragraph in *Punch*, in which Wilde's disappointment at the Adelphi was recorded. In its number for 10th December 1881 the following "Impressions Du Theâtre" appeared: "The production of Mr Oscar Wilde's play 'Vera' is deferred. Naturally no one would expect a Veerer to be at all certain: it must be, like a

pretendedly infallible forecast, so very weather-cocky. *Vera* is about Nihilism, this looks as if there was nothing in it. But why did Mr O. Wilde select the Adelphi for his first appearance as a Dramatic Author, in which career we wish him cordially all the success he may deserve? Why did he not select the Savoy? Surely where there's a Donkey Cart—we should say D'Oyly Carte—there ought to be an opportunity for an 'Os-car?"

"In answer to numerous inquiries we beg to state that as far as we know the Wilds of Scotland are no relation to the Wildes of Ireland.—*Ed.*"

Although he did not succeed in placing his drama, and though the lecture-tour was not as fruitful as he may have been led to expect after his triumphant reception both in New York and in Boston, this year's travelling in America was productive of the greatest good in the development of his character. Brought into daily and hourly contact with the most energetic of men, his latent energy aroused itself. He returned to Europe sharpened and stimulated to a degree that made him almost irrecognisable. America "had taken all the nonsense out of him," if so trivial a phrase may be used in this connection. The dealings he had had with men, the struggles

both social and commercial in which he had in the main triumphed had given him experience which years of life in London might never have afforded. His eyes had, moreover, been opened to the exact value, as an asset to a man who wishes to reach to influence and power, of the affectations which he had till then assumed. He had had, so to speak, a sound commercial training during those twelve months in America. The conclusion to which he came in the end was that it would be to his interest to discard the unworthy posturings which till then had disfigured him. He dropped his masquerade over board into the Atlantic and never again assumed it. And here masquerade applies as much to affectation of manner and speech as to the actual disguise he had been wearing.

CHAPTER X

A Man of Moods—He goes to Paris—His Success there—Why it was not Greater—Oscar Wilde and Edmond de Goncourt—Oscar Wilde and Daudet—His Visit to Victor Hugo—His Imitation of Balzac—His Sincerity of Purpose—"The Duchess of Padua"—The History of this Play—Dr Max Meyerfeld's Version—Its Ill-fated Production in Hamburg—"The Sphynx" and "The Harlot's House"—Oscar Wilde as seen in Paris in 1883—His Fine Character—His High Morality—His Mode of Life—Oscar Wilde and Paul Bourget—Oscar Wilde's Straits—He is forced to leave Paris—"Exit Oscar!" and Edmund Yates' Reply.

Oscar Wilde was a man of moods. He himself used to speak of these moods as periods through which he has passed. When he reached Paris in the spring of 1883 he described himself as beginning a new period of his life. He repudiated all responsibility for the Oscar Wilde of the "æsthetic movement." "That was the Oscar Wilde of the second period," he used to say, "I am now in my third period."

On returning from America, after a very short stay in London, he proceeded immediately to Paris. Here he definitely abandoned his peculiar costume. For a short time still he wore his hair long, but he had not been very many days in

Paris before he discovered that an affectation of Bohemianism was a pose which the men of letters in France who counted had long since abandoned. Murger's heroes were entirely out of date. A transformation imposed itself, and one day he went to the *coiffeur*, from whose hands he emerged with the appearance of a gentleman in the mode of the day. He used to explain that it had been on contemplating the bust of Nero in the Louvre that he had decided that hair must not be worn long, and he used to speak of the style in which he then wore it as " my Neronian coiffure." Very shortly after his arrival in Paris Mr Theodore Child, the correspondent of *The World*, recorded the event in his journal in the following terms : " Amongst other illustrious visitors to Paris, besides the Gladstone family, we have had and still have, Oscar Wilde. Mr Wilde, is, of course, utterly unknown to the French, and does not probably intend to take any measures to make himself known. Last week he was entertained at dinner by some English and American artists and journalists, and at dessert he made a very clever little speech on his American experience. Generally speaking, Mr Wilde told us, while in America he had to converse on art with people who derived their notions of painting from chromo-lithographs,

and their notions of sculpture from the figures in front of the tobacconist's shops. In Colorado, however, and the Rocky Mountains, Mr Wilde was agreeably surprised by the æsthetic predispositions of the natives, and at Leadville in particular, he found some of his own theories on art-police fully accepted. "When I arrived in Leadville," Mr Wilde said, "in the evening I went to the Casino. There I found the miners and pianist—sitting at a piano over which was this notice : 'Please do not shoot at the pianist, he is doing his best.' I was struck with this recognition of the fact that bad art merits the penalty of death, and I felt that in this remote city, where the æsthetic applications of the revolver were already admitted in the case of music, my apostolic task would be much simplified, as indeed it was."

Oscar Wilde had very tactfully come to the conclusion that as there was a great deal of what was ridiculous in the pretentions of the Oscar Wilde of the "second period," it would be the wisest thing to do, to laugh with his mockers, and he certainly seemed to take huge delight in bringing out the funny aspects of what he called his "apostolic task." He was full of anecdotes about his American tour, and it is a great pity that he never gave execution to the plan he had

formed on leaving America of writing a volume of his American impressions. It would have been full of humour, and from the nature of the man the humour would have been kindly. He was bitter only against affectation and pretentiousness. The simple and kindly Americans would have been spared the lash of his satire.

The story about the pianist in Leadville was a favourite one of his, and he developed it as he repeated it. On the 5th of May of that year he was dining with Edmond de Goncourt who in his diary thus records what Oscar Wilde told him :—

" Dined with the poet Oscar Wilde.

" This poet, who tells the most improbable stories, gives us an amusing picture of a town in Texas, with its population of convicts, its revolver habits, its pleasure resorts, where one reads on a notice : ' Please not to shoot at the pianist who is doing his best.' He tells us of the hall at the Casino, which, as it is the biggest room in the place, is used for the Assize-Court, and here they hang criminals on the stage after the performance. He told us that he had seen there a man who had been hanged clinging to the scenery uprights, while the audience fired their revolvers at him from their seats.

" In those places, it would also appear, the

theatrical managers look out for real criminals to play the parts of criminals, and when 'Macbeth' is to be staged and a person is wanted for the rôle of Lady Macbeth offers are made to a woman who has been convicted for poisoning, and who has just been released after serving her sentence. One sees posters thus worded: 'The part will be taken by Mrs X.,' and, in brackets, the words '(10 Years Penal Servitude).'"

It may be noted that Monsieur de Goncourt did not faithfully record in his diary the things that he heard. He allowed his fine imagination to play when he sat down to his *Journal des Goncourt*. His entries have little historical value. He used to "touch up" an anecdote; he used to add to a statement of fact. He was always preoccupied as to the effect that the passage would produce on the reader. This great artist would have made the ideal city editor on a New York journal. In his diary for 1895 he records a conversation which he had with a gentleman who told him of Wilde's arrival at midnight at his mother's house in Oakley Street, after his release on bail, in a manner in which malevolence seems to have guided his pen. The gist of this page is that everybody was drunk in the house in Oakley Street, and for this statement his informant's

narrative had not given the shadow of a suggestion.

Theodore Child was in error when he wrote that Oscar Wilde did not probably intend to take any measures to make himself known in Paris. He did take active measures. He had brought with him from London a number of copies of his volume of "Poems," and soon after he had settled down in his rooms in the Hotel Voltaire on the Quai Voltaire he sent his book accompanied by a letter to a number of leading men in Paris, both writers and painters. At the time of his trial, in many drawing-rooms this volume and the letter which had accompanied it were laid out on view, as curiosities *d'actualité*, and people were able to convince themselves of the extraordinary knowledge of French which these well-written letters displayed. His advances were favourably received—as such advances always are in humane and enlightened Paris—and many doors were opened to him. He was frequently in the exclusive society which numbered Edmond de Goncourt amongst its ornaments ; he frequented the leading painters of the impressionist school ; and he was welcomed at the house of Sarah Bernhardt where he met many of the most distinguished people in Paris. He was generally liked and admired, but he would certainly have

produced a better impression in literary Paris if he had not deemed it necessary to " amaze " the Parisians by telling them stories and making statements to them, which with all their *bad-auderie* they could not accept as truthful fact. For instance, at an evening party on 21st April, Oscar Wilde speaking to Monsieur de Goncourt in the presence of a large number of highly-cultured people was heard to remark that the only Englishman who till then had read Balzac was Swinburne. Such a statement as that would appear to the people who overheard the remark, nothing more than what the French call *une blague*, and Oscar Wilde would create the impression of being *un blagueur*. Now no worse impression can be created in literary Paris than this. The Parisians have a certain reverence for the things of literature and art ; they desire these things to be treated with the respect that is accorded to religion by others ; and to be paradoxical and *outré* about them is to forfeit the attention of those whose good opinion it is worth while to cultivate. It is to be feared that Oscar Wilde was never really understood in Paris. A man who does not take himself seriously in Paris, as a writer or an artist, will never induce people to take him seriously. A large number of Parisians listening to Wilde's brilliant talk,

and failing to perceive the humour which overhung his remarks simply set him down as a charlatan who was trying to deceive them, and resented the attempt. It is only since his death, since the publication of Jean Joseph-Renaud's masterly translation of "Intentions," and the writings which have appeared on "De Profundis" that the Parisian men of letters are beginning to see that they had totally misunderstood the brilliant young man who made such efforts to interest and amuse them. At the same time it is not difficult to imagine what effect must have been produced on an audience of artists in Paris when Oscar Wilde told them—a thing which he was at that time very fond of repeating—that he used to spend hours at the Louvre in rapt admiration before the Venus of Milos. Alphonse Daudet who met him in those days in Paris, both at his own house and at *soirées*, notably at the house of the famous painter of Parisian landscapes, de Nittis, conceived from hearing him talk in this manner a distrust of him which he was never able to cast off. Now Daudet was very quick at noting the salient traits in a man's character, and it shows that Oscar Wilde must have dissembled his real nature with the greatest skill, the most unfortunate ability, for he was just of that exquisite

artistic mould which would have delighted Alphonse Daudet, while his kindness of heart and great refinement would have won for him the warm friendship of the impressionable Southerner. Daudet was deceived by Oscar Wilde's outward manner, which shows that he must have exerted great powers to dissimulate the superiority of his nature, just as others who came into contact with Daudet by a similar exertion of profound hypocrisy were able to deceive him as to their worthlessness.

At Victor Hugo's house Oscar Wilde enjoyed one evening no little success, although the master himself did not interrupt his usual nap to listen to his visitor: but it was just after Swinburne's visit to Hugo's house and the *habitués* of Hugo's salon were most interested to hear Wilde speak of the English poet. There was a lady there, a Polish princess, who had translated some of Swinburne's poems into French, who was so pleased with Oscar Wilde's eloquent championship of the poet, against whom a certain hostility reigned in that *milieu*, that she became the speaking-trumpet of the young Irishman's fame in the many good houses in Paris which she visited.

Although Oscar Wilde had laid aside his æsthetic masquerade there were certain points

about his dress which did not please the Parisians. For one thing he used to wear fur-coats. Of these he had two or three. One was a very noticeable one, being made of green cloth with black *brandebourgs*. Now, in those days gentlemen did not wear fur-coats in Paris. It was also his habit to have his hair curled every day. There was too much "get-up" about his appearance to please the Paris men of the world. As a matter of fact, though Paris did not perceive it, Oscar Wilde was paying to French literature the compliment of modelling himself on the great writer Balzac. He was then in a period of imitation of this great writer for whom his admiration increased with each year of his life. When at work at the Hotel Voltaire he used to put on a white gown with a monkish cowl, because it was in a dressing-gown like this that Balzac, who wrote mostly at nights, used to work. At the time when Balzac, who had doomed himself for years to celibacy and continence, at last went courting, the recluse assumed all the graces of the contemporary Parisian dandy. He wore the most elegant costumes, he adorned himself with jewellery, and he carried when he went abroad a walking-stick which was so noticeable that it inspired Delphine Gay with the subject of a novel, "La

Canne de Monsieur de Balzac." In all these points Oscar Wilde imitated the master with whose industry and enthusiasm for literary art he was endeavouring to imbue himself. He dressed much after the fashion of the fops of 1848, he wore noticeable jewellery, and he carried a stick which was the replica of Balzac's *canne*. This was a stick of ivory with the pummel set with turquoises. The costume was the outward sign of a very laudable effort. It can be to nothing but the credit of any writer to wish to imitate Balzac ; and if by adopting his peculiarities a man might hope to attain to any degree of his powers of production and style, one would like to see the whole Republic of Letters curled as to the hair, bejewelled, clad in 1848 costumes, and carrying ivory sticks with turquoise-stone pummels. But Paris did not understand the suggestion of Oscar Wilde's dress, and did not believe that a man who seemed to talk so flippantly had any real artistic strivings in him. Oscar forgot that not any more in Paris than in London, in London than in Berlin, are men prone to a charitable interpretation of any act of fellow man. He was labelled a *poseur* when he was only trying by dressing a part to enter into the very spirit of the man whom he wished to imitate in his excellent qualities.

Many of the greatest actors which the stage has ever produced would have failed utterly to represent the parts in which they most triumphed, had they not been allowed to " dress the parts." Paris might have understood this, but preferred to disbelieve that any such strivings animated the young man. Yet at that very time he was actually inspiring himself from Balzac's example, and at no period in his life, except, perhaps, when he was writing " De Profundis," did he more sternly discipline himself to that constant labour which, as Balzac said, is the law of art. During those months at the Hotel Voltaire he wrote that great play " The Duchess of Padua," which some of his admirers rank with the Elizabethan masterpieces. This play was originally written for Mary Anderson, and while Oscar was yet in Paris the manuscript was sent to her for her perusal. She declined it, greatly to the author's secret discomfiture. Mary Anderson probably saw that it was not likely to succeed as a play for the stage. This opinion proved itself in the event to be a right one. The " Duchess " has been tried twice in two different languages and has failed each time. The first performance was given in New York in the early nineties. It gained a great *succés d'estime*, but it never came to be considered a paying piece. Only last year

negotiations were being made between a beautiful young American actress, who was anxious to mount the play and take the part of the Duchess, and a lady who owns the American acting rights. The negotiations fell through on other grounds but those of terms; and when it is recorded that the only fee demanded by the holder of the copyright for the right of performance was five pounds a week, it will be understood at what a low figure the financial possibilities of the play were estimated in the American theatrical world. But the play for all that had warm admirers. Indeed, it was at the suggestion of her mother that the young American actress referred to above had desired to mount the "Duchess of Padua." In a letter to one of Oscar Wilde's friends this lady wrote :—

"Many years ago I saw a performance (in New York) of Oscar Wilde's play 'The Duchess of Padua' with Laurence Barrett and Mina Gale in the leading rôles. The play made a decided impression on me, and I have often wondered why it has not been revived."

This play has not been published in England, but an excellent German translation by Doctor Max Meyerfeld of Berlin appeared more than a year ago. This version was produced in December 1904 at one of the leading theatres in

Hamburg. It was not a success, and after three nights was withdrawn. It cannot be said that justice was done to it, nor that it had a fair trial. The translation is excellent. Doctor Meyerfeld has rendered Oscar Wilde's verse in German verse of quite equal merit, nor has he in any way sacrificed the original to the necessities of translation. The German play is in itself a fine piece of literature. The acting was, however, deplorable. The man who played the part of Guido was suffering from influenza, and for this reason made a burlesque of the last act. In this act the great scene is where the Duchess finding Guido asleep in his prison addresses him in impassioned language. The Duchess's fine tirade was at the Hamburg theatre constantly interrupted by the snuffling, sneezing, and coughing of the sleeping hero. The Duchess was herself by no means word-perfect. But the climax of misfortune was reached on the night of the third performance when the actor who played the part of the Cardinal suddenly went mad on the stage and had to be removed *vi et armis* to a lunatic asylum. The Official Receiver in Oscar Wilde's bankruptcy then intervened, questioning the right of the poet's literary executors to give Dr Meyerfeld the right to produce the play in Germany; and under the circumstances the

Doctor thought it advisable to withdraw it from the stage.[1]

His version was enthusiastically reviewed in *The Daily Chronicle* by William Archer, who saluted Oscar Wilde as having revealed himself in this play a dramatic poet of very high rank. It was this play which Oscar Wilde was writing at the time when the Paris men of letters were regarding him with suspicion as a literary charlatan. As an artist, and as an intellect, there were not more than three men in the Paris literary world of that day who were the equals of this literary charlatan. Some of his finest verse was also written at this time, notably " The Sphynx," over which he laboured with the application of Flaubert, but perhaps with better results. This piece has been published several times. The original edition was issued in a beautiful form in September 1894 by Messrs Elkin Matthews and John Lane. It is a masterpiece of the poetry which is not spontaneous. The inspiration came from Poe through Baudelaire. Both these poets were at that time exercising upon Oscar Wilde as strong an influence as in another way was Balzac. In the " Harlot's

[1] " The Duchess of Padua " was revived early this year in Berlin. It was killed by the critics, and its ill-fated performance resulted in a heavy financial loss to the devoted Meyerfeld.

House," a poem which he wrote at the same time, Oscar Wilde was more himself. As to the publication of this poem we find in the excellent bibliography which is appended to the translation of André Gide's monograph on Wilde the following note :—" The original publication of ' The Harlot's House ' has not yet been traced. The approximate date is known by a parody on the poem, called ' The Public House,' which appeared in *The Sporting Times* of 13th June 1885. In 1904 a privately printed edition, on folio paper, with five illustrations by Althea Gyles, was issued by the Mathurin Press, London. In 1905 another edition was privately printed in London, 8 pp., wrappers." It was a short lyrical poem. The poet is standing in the street outside the house of the Scarlet Woman and looks up at the windows of which the blinds are drawn down. It is night, and on the blinds appear the " silhouettes " of the dancing figures, the " marionettes " within. In this poem Oscar Wilde overcame his objection to the use of words ending in " ette " for which he professed a real artistic horror. The last lines of the poem in which he speaks of the dawn fleeing down the street like a frightened girl are very beautiful. Perhaps the tone of the whole thing, like that of " The Sphynx," is not " robust," but, as we

have said, Oscar Wilde was then impregnated with the essence of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*.

To those who came to know him intimately in those days in Paris he appeared one of the most gifted as also one of the best of men. He was then in the height of his intellectual powers. The fiend of his insanity never betrayed its presence by the faintest indication. His refinement and chastity of speech and life seemed to show how well he had schooled himself in the example of the great artist whom he had set up above him as his master. He was the most delightful companion that a man could meet. More than personal magnetism emanated from his joyous personality. Men used to wonder what this quality was in him that seemed to stimulate in those who came near him every desirable faculty. To-day, when the scientists speak of radio-activity, men might wonder whether in human beings also this principle did not exist so that such men as possess this quality can as readily affect those who approach them as substances which are brought into the proximity of radium are affected. A distinguished man was heard to wonder whether there be not sexes of the intellect. "Most men would then appear to have female intellects; the very rare, the geniuses, having male intellects. From the con-

tact of the two, great thoughts spring off. I know," he added " that my brain never seems to live nor to be so fertile as it does when I am in the company of Oscar Wilde." His geniality was another trait that endeared him to all who saw him in private life. His joyousness of life was as exhilarating as a draught of generous wine. He seemed a happy man. His happiness made others feel the folly of despondency and pessimism. His gratitude to his Maker for his creation was revealed in the intense delight he took in every little thing that is good and pleasant in the world. As to his morality we read in " The Story of an Unhappy Friendship." " The example of his purity of life in such a city as Paris, of his absolute decency of language, of his conversation, in which never an improper suggestion intruded, the elegance and refinement which endowed him, would have compelled even the most perverse and dissolute to some restraint. The companionship of Oscar Wilde, in the days in which I lived in his intimacy, would have made a gentleman, at least outwardly, of a man of bad morals and unclean tongue."

He used to live in great luxury, dining every evening, when he had money, at the most fashionable Parisian restaurants. He preferred Bignon's in the Avenue de l'Opéra, but he some-

times went to the Café de Paris, which was quite as expensive, or, when he felt inclined for the Latin Quarter, to Foyot's or to Lavenue's. At this last place he used to meet John Sargent the painter, and Paul Bourget; and in the album at that café John Sargent one day sketched his portrait with that of Bourget and another friend. With Bourget he had some relationship, and the two used frequently to meet at the Café d'Orsay, which has long since disappeared. Although Bourget has never written anything about Wilde it was obvious in those days that he was impressed by the man's genius; his constant deference and the things which he said about him were proof of that.

He was not always prosperous. The funds which he had brought with him from America, not a large amount, had been exhausted; his work produced nothing, and his expenses were heavy. His resources during that period in Paris were derived from the final disposal of his property in Ireland. There was a small estate called the Red Island which at that time was being melted into gold. There were times when he was very pressed for money, when the fashionable restaurants had to be abandoned. During these periods he used to take his meals in his hotel, and it was at his hotel that with no

splendour he was forced to entertain the poet, Rollinat, for whose book "La Main de Troppmann" he professed a great admiration. The *macabre* was then greatly preoccupying his mind, but that it never corrupted his bounding optimism his whole subsequent career establishes.

Mary Anderson's refusal of the "Duchess of Padua" was a great disappointment to him. He had hoped from the proceeds of that play to be able to continue his luxurious life of literary activity in Paris. But, as there was nothing to be looked for from this source, and as the lawyers in Ireland declared it impossible to squeeze any more gold out of the barren acres of the Red Island, the Paris days had to be brought to an end. He returned to England in the summer of 1883 under the necessity of finding a means of gaining his livelihood. An important journal then published an article concerning his position, achievements and prospects, the tone of which is best explained by the title under which it appeared: "Exit Oscar." Edmund Yates rebutted this article in the next number of *The World,* and said that in any case Oscar's exit was a very brilliant one after the great artistic and social successes which he had enjoyed in Paris. The fact was, however, that his position at that time was a very difficult one. Yet with

great courage and a never-failing dignity he faced the situation, and, in the event, came through it triumphantly. An American firm of lecture-agents which had a branch in London approached him immediately on his return to London and, having no option in the matter, he came to terms with them. It was under their auspices that he lectured one afternoon in the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly, before a moderate audience. He was at that time living in two small rooms at the top of a house in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square. To outward appearance he was very prosperous, and must have continued to stir the gall of the envious. He smoked Parascho cigarettes, and was sometimes to be seen dining in the grill-room of the Café Royal with Whistler. But the meal was ever a frugal one, and the wine which accompanied the modest grill was always a claret chosen from the very top of the list.

CHAPTER XI

Oscar Wilde on the Lecture-Platform—His Provincial Audiences—What the People hoped to see—What they saw—And heard—Two Pen Pictures by Provincials—How People of Refinement considered him—The Opinion of a Distinguished Woman—Oscar Wilde released from this Penance—His Marriage with Constance Lloyd—The Extraordinary Wedding—Dresses—The Foreboding of Certain—Oscar Wilde's New Home—His Straightened Circumstances—Some Fine Writings—His Failure as a Lecturer—The Dublin Fiasco—A Prophet in his own Country—The Caution of *The Freeman's Journal*—The Wildes' Poverty—His Two Sons.

IMMEDIATELY after the lecture in the Prince's Hall Oscar Wilde commenced to visit various provincial towns in different parts of the kingdom to give his address on "The House Beautiful," under a contract with a firm of lecture-agents. The labour was not distasteful to him, and the fees earned in this way were at that time his sole resource. He was so poor in the autumn of 1883 that he was frequently obliged to have recourse to the pawnbrokers, and just before his first lecture in London, a friend accompanied him to Marlborough Street Police Court to swear to the loss of a pawn-ticket before the magistrate. The same friend remembers a day, at about the

same time, when he was entirely devoid of funds, and for once, at least, could have written himself down, *impransus*, as he retired to bed. Under no other circumstances would he have brought himself to associate his name with the enterprise of those provincial lectures, so clear was it made to him that its success was expected not from the value and the interest of the address, but from the notoriety attaching to his name as the eccentric "æsthete." The great majority of the people who came to his lectures paid the entrance fee with no other purpose than to stare at the man who was reported to have a strange passion for sunflowers and lilies. Everybody had heard of "the æsthetic movement," very few even knew the meaning of the adjective.

It was to imbeciles of this calibre that this scholar was forced by his necessity to discourse. His lectures were not successful in any degree, nor can the speculation have been a very profitable one to the agents who had engaged upon it. People were vastly disappointed to find that his appearance, dress, and manners were no different from those of any gentleman. The advertisements of these lectures which appeared in some provincial town were calculated to arouse the highest expectations of the morbidly curious. A show was promised; the subject-matter of the

lecture was not referred to. On certain newspaper files in different parts of the country one may still read display advertisements, running down whole columns, after some such fashion of vulgarity as this :—

HE IS COMING!!!
HE IS COMING!!!
HE IS COMING!!!

WHO IS COMING???
WHO IS COMING???
WHO IS COMING???

OSCAR WILDE!!!
OSCAR WILDE!!!
OSCAR WILDE!!!

THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!
THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!
THE GREAT ÆSTHETE!!!

It was in this way that it was brought to the public notice that a gentleman of rare scholarship and great erudition designed to address a meeting on a subject on which, at least, from a careful study of its masters and extensive reading and observation he was adequately qualified to speak. One day in Charles Street one of his friends picked up a provincial newspaper which

was lying on his table. Oscar Wilde, whose manners were always gentle and urbane, flushed red, and violently snatched it from his hands. "Do not look at that!" he cried, crushing the paper up and flinging the ball into the fire. His friend, had, however, noticed an advertisement similar in tone to the one of which a part is given above. Nobody felt more keenly the degradation of these exhibitions than the potential author of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" himself. Although his want of money was pressing at this time he indignantly refused to appear in "æsthetic costume," in spite of the fact that for such an additional attraction a much higher fee would have been paid to him. In view of his refusal the agents, who were well aware that it was the person of Oscar Wilde and not at all what he might have to say about beautiful houses that would attract the sightseers of the provinces, were obliged to conceal the fact that no spectacle was to be afforded. The references to "the great æsthete" in the advertisements contained the suggestion that something laughable was to be on exhibition, and when the audience discovered that instead of watching the antics, and listening to the patter, of a buffoon, they were expected to lend ear to a disquisition delivered by a scholar which

invited their minds to ascend to a plane of inaccessible height they were not slow to express their disappointment and disapproval. On several occasions the room emptied itself during the progress of the lecture.

It will be of interest to put on record here—in spite of the vulgarity of their style—two pen-pictures of him drawn at the time in different places by two provincial journalists, for they will show first what the audience had expected to see, and secondly how they were impressed by his appearance and delivery. They are representative of opinions expressed throughout the country.

This is the first :—

"We were informed by the advertisement pamphlet that this gentleman has, since the publication of his book of poems in 1890, devoted his time to public addresses. So, as poets do not often come before the public personally, we were naturally anxious to see what a poet-lecturer was like. With imaginary visions of celebrated poets in mind we were anxiously awaiting the appearance of Mr Wilde upon the platform, when the curtain was drawn asunder, and in walked not a Tennyson, but a Long-fellow. For the first *quart d'heure* we could not erase the impression from our minds that the subject of the lecture was not 'the house beautiful,' but 'the man beautified.' This *cheveux de frise*—he gets very warm on the subject of friezes—proved at a glance how highly the lecturer estimated the power of capillary attraction, for his head seemed surrounded with a perfect halo of artificially-arrayed curls, which, if removable, would doubtless fetch a figurative sum at an auction sale as a most admirable substitute for a lady's bonnet. Joking apart, no gentleman would contradict a lady who said that Mr Wilde could rejoice in the

possession of a hairy head which at once stamps him as a master of artistic decoration. His collar had evidently been made to an original design, which has no doubt been deposited at South Kensington and the pattern patented, or it must have been in the market long ago. His necktie was neither tied nor untied, but, like the clerical collar, puzzled one to know where it began and how it ended. His cuffs were equally æsthetic and 'took one by the collar.' Mr Wilde's theory as to the harmonious arrangement of colours in art decoration is that our backgrounds should consist of tertiary or neutral tints, relieved by small objects or ornaments of rich primary colour or bright appearance. The man beautified was accordingly arrayed in the neutral tints of black and white, with the rich relief in the shape of a red silk handkerchief peeping out from the left side of his vest, and a massive watch-chain pendant, which appeared like the name-label on a bunch of keys, inasmuch as no one else had one just like it. In (not on) those marvellous members of the human body, the hands, were held a pair of white silk gloves, which if the owner did not know to be useful at all events *felt* to be beautiful. Tall and graceful, and presenting a youthful appearance, he delivers his lecture with clear, distinct articulation, never hesitating for a word, nor striving after flights of eloquence, but handling his subject with an amount of assurance and self-possession that gives you the impression that he must be quite as high an authority as Morris or Ruskin, whom he quotes to agree or disagree with. . . . The closing part of his lecture on art education drew forth repeated applause, and, in fact, the whole of it was sufficiently interesting to gain for him unbroken attention during the hour and a half which his lecture occupied."

This is how the second provincial journalist wrote :—

"Oscar Wilde, the æsthetic—the ineffable—the exponent of the principle of eternal loveliness has visited us and is—*human*. He is not an angel after all! Nor is he a deity springing to us out of the dark past. His food must have been other than the nectar'd sweets the poets love to write about; in fact he can be seen, and heard, and handled, for he is a—man. This revelation will come as an unwelcome surprise to many. One so delightfully out of sympathy with

the age, with such ineffable yearnings towards the romantic past, with such inexpressible aspirations towards the beauteous future, when the essential ugliness of to-day shall only be remembered as a hideous dream, such a man cannot be—ought not to be—one of us. So I am sure many think. I believe it was Mrs Browning who describes how sad we feel when we find our cherished idols simply to be clay ; but I can confess to no such revelation of feeling when Mr Oscar Wilde stepped on to the platform and I discovered he had no wings. Mr Oscar Wilde is tall, well-proportioned, with a poet's hair, and —shall I say it—a mildly epicurean countenance. In his appearance there was nothing Byronic, or Bulwerian, or Carlylean, or Ruskinesque ; a little that savoured of Count d'Orsay, Beau Brummel, and more that suggested the traditional diner-out. His dress had few peculiarities, being ordinary evening-dress, a very wilderness of shirt-front, relieved by a half-concealed scarlet handkerchief, deftly placed inside his vest. His pose and manner might have been artistic, but were not particularly effective. His voice is a moderately pleasing one, with an occasional lisp to give it an aristocratic tone. His action—what little there was of it—was striking. He spoke entirely extempore, not even availing himself of the use of notes. For very much more than an hour he addressed his audience. There was no hesitation, and there was no fire. Only once there was an approach to pathos, and as far as I could detect only one quotation from the poets, excepting an extract he gave in the form of a letter—I think—of John Keats. He came to speak to us on an important subject. And here I must say, that if his lecture had been called the 'Home Beautiful,' instead of the 'House Beautiful,' I should have been better pleased. Englishmen—especially such as would go and hear such a discourse as Oscar Wilde's—do not care much for their "houses," they care everything for their homes. An Englishman never says he is going to his 'house,' but always that he is going 'home.' A house to an Englishman is an empty building. The same building filled with furniture, and all sorts of lovely things—plus wife and children —becomes a home."

On people of refinement the impression produced was, of course, a different one. Many

people in many parts of the country remembering him as he appeared to them twenty-two years ago speak regretfully of his fate. Over women his personality seems to have exercised a great influence. "I can remember him," writes a lady of refinement and culture from a Midland town, "as though I had seen him yesterday. My mother was delighted with his appearance ; she often afterwards spoke of his hair and his hands and his tie—oh ! his tie, how it impressed us all. For my part, though I was only a girl then, I felt he was saying things which nobody present could understand, and it seemed to me at times as though he knew it also. I felt it was a pity he should have had to come here at all, for I suppose it was necessity that drove him on to the lecture-platform. Many of the things he said have remained familiar in my mind ever since. I never see a big curtain-pole without thinking of what he said about the sins of the upholsterer, and I know that I never drink a cup of tea at a railway refreshment-room without remembering how he described the cup out of which he drank his coffee at the hotel in San Francisco, where he contrasted the crockery of the Chinese in the Chinese quarter of that city, with the domestic vessels used by the Europeans. It was a real distress to me to sit in that lecture-room

looking at this wonderful youth and listening to his profound and beautiful words, while the rest of the audience were either gazing with dismay and surprise, or showing how bored they were. The room was not half-full to begin with, and during the whole course of the lecture people kept getting up and going out. But he seemed quite indifferent to the mood of his audience, his manner, if I may use the term in such a connection, was quite business-like. It was as if he was saying to himself, 'I am here to say certain things, and I shall go on speaking until I have said them.' He began speaking the moment he came on the stage, and when he had said his last word he walked off as if anxious to catch a train and get away from us all."

Those amongst his provincial audiences who listened to him, and who attempted to be critical, were in the habit of saying that his weakness as a lecturer was in a tendency to exaggeration. Some Joseph Prud'homme of the provinces sagely remarked: "He pronounces as *dicta*, with the authority of an oracle, principles which are essentially debateable."

The most favourite criticism, however, of Oscar Wilde's lecture on "The House Beautiful"—a criticism which can be found in similar phraseology in contemporary prints all over the

country, and not in the provinces alone—was to the effect that : " Mr Oscar Wilde seems to ignore the deeply-rooted prejudice that æstheticism if not symbolic of weakness and effeminacy, is, at least, the antithesis of that moral and intellectual robustness which we, in this age, are accustomed to respect."

From this bondage, from these chains, which to such an artist must have been galling indeed, Oscar Wilde was to be rescued by the gentle and beautiful Constance Lloyd. To her for some time past he had been paying attentions ; it was during the course of his lecture-tour that he was able to visit Dublin and ask her to become his wife. Constance Lloyd admired him and loved him ; she put her hand into his. She was wealthily connected ; she was assured of a good income on her marriage by her grandfather, who had instituted her to be his heiress. The marriage took place on the 29th of May 1884 ; we find the following announcement of it in *The Times* for 31st May : " On 29th May, at St James's Church, Paddington, by the Rev. Walter Abbott, Vicar, Oscar, younger son of the late Sir William Wilde, M.D., of Dublin, to Constance Mary, only daughter of the late Horace Lloyd, Esq. Q.C." Edmund Yates gave a friendly notice of the occurrence in *The World* for 4th

June 1884 :—" Mr Oscar Wilde's wedding went off with more simple effect than the large crowd who thronged the church had possibly come out to see. Owing to the illness of Mr John Horatio Lloyd, the bride's grandfather, the ceremony was meant to be of rather a private character, and only the near relatives were asked to meet at Lancaster Gate after the service. There is only this much to be recorded about it: that the bride, accompanied by her six pretty bridesmaids, looked charming ; that Oscar bore himself with calm dignity ; and that all most intimately concerned in the affair seemed thoroughly pleased. A happy little group of *intimes* saw them off at Charing Cross." Yet the baroque and the bizarre were not wanting in this wedding which sealed a union which was to end in such unhappiness. It appeared that Oscar Wilde felt it incumbent on him as a " Professor of Æsthetics " to give such directions as to the dresses of his bride and bridesmaids as might impress the onlookers with the fact that it was no ordinary wedding that they were attending. A brief description of these dresses will establish this suggestion. " The bride's rich creamy satin dress was of a delicate cowslip tint ; the bodice, cut square and somewhat low in front, was finished with a high Medici collar ;

the ample sleeves were puffed ; the skirt, made plain, was gathered by a silver girdle of beautiful workmanship, the gift of Mr Oscar Wilde ; the veil of saffron-coloured Indian silk gauze was embroidered with pearls and worn in Marie Stuart fashion ; a thick wreath of myrtle leaves, through which gleamed a few white blossoms, crowned her fair frizzed hair ; the dress was ornamented with clusters of myrtle leaves ; the large bouquet had as much green in it as white. The six bridesmaids were cousins of the bride. Two dainty little figures, that seemed to have stepped out of a picture by Sir Joshua Reynolds, led the way. They were dressed in quaintly-made gowns of Surah silk, the colour of a ripe gooseberry ; large pale yellow sashes round their waist ; the skirts falling in straight folds to the ankles displayed small bronze, high-heeled shoes. Large red silk Gainsborough hats decked with red and yellow feathers shaded the damsels' golden hair ; amber necklaces, long yellow gloves, a cluster of yellow roses at their throats, a bouquet of white lilies in their hands, completed the attire of the tiny bridesmaids. The four elder bridesmaids wore skirts of the same red Surah silk, with over-dresses of pale blue *mousseline de laine*, the bodices made long and pointed ; high crowned hats trimmed with

Photo by Rischgitz.

16, TITE STREET.

cream-coloured feathers and red knots of ribbon, lilies in their hands, amber necklaces and yellow roses at their throats made up a sufficiently picturesque *ensemble*. One of the ladies present wore what was described as a "very æsthetic costume." It was composed of "an underdress of rich red silk with a sleeveless smock of red plush, a hat of white lace trimmed with clusters of red roses under the brim and round the crown." This gaudy and displeasing picture must be recalled. It proves as nothing else could prove the entire confidence of Constance Lloyd in the artistic pretensions of her husband. No woman who was not blindly convinced of the superiority of her bridegroom's taste would have consented to such a masquerade. It may have occurred to some of the onlookers that a union so initiated could not contain the elements of happiness. Where the woman is entirely hypnotised and subjugated her marriage is not often a happy one for her.

On the day of his wedding Oscar Wilde took his young wife over to Paris, and the first weeks of the honeymoon were spent in that city. They occupied a suite of rooms at the Hotel Wagram in the rue de Rivoli. They both seemed to be radiantly happy. Oscar was a gallant and de-

voted husband, and Constance seemed to be swathed in rapturous delight. If ever her husband left her alone to go out with any friend, a few minutes after his departure a messenger would arrive at the hotel bearing for the bride a bouquet of exquisite flowers together with a note couched in language of such impassioned adoration that it charmed her solitude and made her happy even though her loved one was away.

Mrs Wilde's dowry enabled the young couple to take the lease of a good house in Tite Street, Chelsea, which was the last home of his own that Oscar was to possess. It was decorated under the direction of Whistler, and was substantially furnished. At the very top of the house a work-room had been installed for Oscar Wilde, the furniture of which was painted red. But he never used this room. The little writing that he ever did at home was done in a small study which was to the right of the entrance passage. Mrs Wilde's income at that time was not large—she did not come into her grandfather's fortune until much later, and it became immediately necessary for Oscar to find remunerative employment. He turned to journalism for livelihood, and he accepted occasional engagements on the lecture-platform. He was a constant contributor of anonymous work to

The World and *The Pall Mall Gazette.* Much of his writings at this time have been traced, and were recently being hawked round the London publishing-houses by speculators in his notoriety. It was a disservice to his reputation, it would appear, which would concern these literary resurrection-men but little. The work was poor; it was the hack-work, *currente calamo*, of a man who had no heart in his labours; and "poorer stuff," said one London publisher to whom this volume was offered, "I never read in my life." Yet at the same time he was writing those exquisite fairy-stories, which were afterwards republished in a volume by David Nutt. "The Happy Prince and Other Tales" (1888); a volume which many of his admirers look upon as his best and most characteristic prose work. There are no fairy-stories in the English language to compare with them. The writing is quite masterly; the stories proceed from a rare and opulent imagination; and while the tales that are told interest the child no less than the man of the world there underlies the whole a subtle philosophy, an indictment of society, a plea for the disinherited, which make of this book and of the "House of Pomegranates" (1891) two veritable *requisitoires* against the social system, as crushing as "The Soul of Man." And yet

as one reads these tales the lesson that the author wishes to teach never forces itself upon him. Unlike Lewis Carroll and Hans Andersen Oscar Wilde tells a story which a child can read with pleasure and interest, and without that uncomfortable feeling that moral medicine is being administered to him in literary preserves. If Oscar Wilde had had hopes that the lecture-platform would afford a source of income to him he was doomed to disappointment. In January 1885 he delivered at the Gaiety, Dublin, under the management of Mr Michael Gunn, two afternoon lectures. The first, given on the afternoon of Monday, 5th January, was on "Dress" (Beauty—Taste—Ugliness in Dress); and the second, on Tuesday, treated of "The Value of Art in Modern Life." Of both these lectures a *resumé* appears at the end of this volume. The enterprise was a disastrous failure. Dublin was indifferent to the son of Speranza, indifferent to the son of Sir William Wilde, indifferent to the brilliant Trinity College man who had so distinguished himself and his country at Oxford, and to the poet and lecturer who had set two worlds talking. We find in *The Freeman's Journal* for 6th January the following prefatory remarks to its notice of the lecture on "Dress":—

" Although the fact of the lecture taking place was fully announced for days in advance the attendance was hardly satisfactory. At most, about 500 persons were present, chiefly in the dress circle and stalls. But the audience though not large was highly intelligent, critical and appreciative of the matter and style of the lecturer. Evidently people have ceased to regard Mr Wilde as the eccentric apostle of a momentarily fashionable craze, to be seen, heard and laughed at."

A highly appreciative account of the lecture followed, but that afternoon the attendance was very much smaller. Possibly the high prices charged for admission frightened the public. Mr Gunn was asking 21s., 30s., and 42s. for private boxes, and proportionate prices for the rest of the house. At that time *matinée* performances of a pantomime were being given at the Gaiety, and it is related that a gentleman accompanied by two boys came by mistake into the theatre, sat down and listened patiently for some time to Oscar's discourse, and finally got up exclaiming: " What's all this ? When's the pantomime going to begin ? " In the following month there appeared in *The Dublin University Review*, of all publications the one in which the greatest deference ought to have been paid to

the Berkeley Medallist, son of Sir William Wilde, and a frequent contributor to its pages, two sarcastic and cutting notices of his lecture. These are they :—

" We confess that before a visit to the Gaiety Theatre dispelled the illusion we had thought that the re-appearance of Mr Oscar Wilde before a Dublin audience would have excited very general interest among his fellow-citizens. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Mr Wilde, like the elephant Jumbo, with whose notoriety his popularity was contemporaneous, has ceased to attract the sympathy and the shillings of the public, we feel bound to express our belief of the talents of that gentleman, and our regret that they have not latterly been more usefully employed. The indifference with which the lecturer was received cannot fairly be ascribed to any falling off in the quality of the lectures, which formed not only a complete exposition of Mr Wilde's peculiar philosophy of art, but were in themselves instructive and suggestive. However, a few more lectures as unfortunate, from a commercial point of view, as those recently delivered in this city will materially remedy this defect, and will help to restore Mr Wilde to public favour. Meanwhile he will not regret the decrease on his receipts, for as

he stated in his second lecture: 'True Art is economical.'"

In the same number of the official organ of T.C.D. appears a letter on Sir Noel Paton's picture "Lux in Tenebris." "It is pretty enough," says the writer, "but it no more realises the idea of a spiritual light shining in the moral darkness of the world than would, let us say, a picture of Mr Oscar Wilde preaching about dress-improvers at the Gaiety."

This was Dublin's salute to the most talented man to whom she had ever given birth. For the rest, although in Ireland one finds little of that horror against the mention of Oscar Wilde's name which still lingers in England, in certain quarters, where one would least expect to find it, it persists. In the summer of last year a gentleman being desirous of purchasing a photograph of Oscar Wilde as a child, and of getting information as to the early life of Speranza, sent an advertisement embodying his requirements to *The Freeman's Journal*, where, if anywhere in Ireland, Lady Wilde's memory ought to have been revered. The advertisement was eventually inserted, but not for several days, during which the manager was communicating with the editor—the acting-editor not having dared to assume so grave a responsibility—as to whether

an advertisement referring to Lady Wilde and her son could be allowed to appear in the journal !

Mr Whistler's attack on Oscar Wilde—the details of which can be found set out in "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies"—did much to reduce still lower any chances of success as a lecturer which remained to Oscar Wilde. Whistler made it public that Oscar Wilde's lecture on the English *Renaissance* was mainly made up from facts and opinions which he, Whistler, had supplied to the lecturer. It would have been just as easy for that admirable actor, Hermann Vezin, to have rushed into print and to have declared that Oscar's manner on the stage was the result of some training in elocution and gesture which he had given him before he commenced his lecture-tour. But then Hermann Vezin is not only a great artist, he is a true and loyal friend. This source of income having failed there were periods of real poverty in the elegant house in Tite Street. A lady who lived near the Wildes has recorded that at that time she was frequently called upon by Mrs Wilde to lend her money, even small sums such as the purchase of a pair of boots might demand. At the same time the expenses of the *ménage* were increasing. In June 1885 and again in November 1886 a son was born to them. Stray writings for the papers,

and an occasional signed contribution to the reviews could not produce the income which was necessary to supplement the wife's allowance, and in the end Oscar Wilde turned to journalism for a living for himself and his family.

CHAPTER XII

Oscar Wilde in Fleet Street—Editor of *The Woman's World*—Pegasus in the Plough—His Loyalty to his Employers—The Industrious Apprentice—Lady Wilde and Constance Wilde as Contributors—A Severe Editor—A Kindly Critic—His List of Contributors—His Later Attacks on Journalists—The Possible Explanation of this Attitude—His Consistency in the Matter—Oscar Wilde and *M'Clure's Magazine*—Oscar Wilde and *Le Journal*—His Contributions to *The Daily Chronicle*—The Disinterestedness of this Work.

It was at this time in his career that he came to be seen, periodically, in that Fleet Street of which, afterwards, he was to speak with such acerbity and contempt.

A firm of publishers of Ludgate Hill—the Messrs Cassell & Co.—had come to the conclusion that his reputation as a leader of fashion and an arbiter of the elegancies might be turned to profitable account on behalf of a certain monthly publication, issued from their printing-presses, which at that time enjoyed no high degree of public favour. The belief was held in La Belle Sauvage Yard that the name of Oscar Wilde printed in large letters upon the cover of this magazine—to be styled afresh : *The Woman's*

World—would attract the attention and the custom also of the fashionable women to whom it was supposed to appeal, bringing in the train of their patronage that multitude of purchasers, who ensure commercial success. In this belief these printers proposed to him the direction of *The Woman's World*: the terms offered were what in his straitened circumstances, with the fresh charges upon him, he could not with prudence refuse, and the bargain was struck. If, after a prolonged test, the adventure did not result in satisfaction, it was not because the new editor failed in vigilance or assiduity, but because London society, in the sense of fashionable people, had not yet come under the sway of his influence. His connection with *The Woman's World* lasted from October 1887 to September 1889.

The amusing spectacle was thus afforded during this period, of a scholar, a critic, an artist acting as overseer and salesman of such productions of the pen as treat of the chatter of the shops, the commonplaces of tiring-room and pantry, the futilities of changing modes. "Are Servants a Failure?" "Fancy Dresses for Children," "Typewriting and Shorthand for Women," are the titles of some of the papers for which the future author of "The Soul of Man

Under Socialism" and of "De Profundis" had to arrange, of which when written to approve, and which he had to send out to the world under his imprimatur. The history of the forlorn makeshifts and expedients to which necessity often constrains the most gifted men of letters affords no example more apposite than this part of Oscar Wilde's life. It reminds one of the experiences of Charles Baudelaire, the poet, when a committee of French provincial shareholders had brought him away from Paris, from the writing of the *Fleurs du Mal* and the translating of Edgar Allan Poe, to edit a local paper. If Charles Baudelaire, however, failed from the very outset, because he despised his work and approached his task in that spirit, it must be said of the Irish poet-editor that he very earnestly did his best for his employers. An apprentice to journalism, he displayed all those qualities of industry, punctuality, and ardour which, as Hogarth would have us believe, lead men to high honours and great wealth in the city of London. It was in the irony of things that a career thus entered upon should have led him, if not to Tyburn, at least to the Old Bailey and the Bankruptcy Court.

Baudelaire's first inquiry on entering the office of the provincial newspaper which he was

to publish, was as to where the "editorial brandy-bottle" was kept. Wilde, was, perhaps, even more a slave to the nicotine habit, than Baudelaire, to alcohol, yet he very cheerfully accommodated himself to the strict rule imposed by Messrs Cassell & Co., that no smoking is allowed, under any pretext, in any part of their buildings. He seemed to take real pleasure in the hours which he spent in La Belle Sauvage Yard, because of the opportunities which were there afforded him of meeting Wemyss Reid, the editor of *The Speaker*, a man of great scholarship and refinement, for whom he had a great admiration. He used to take the underground railway from Sloane Square to Charing Cross, and thence walk up the Strand and Fleet Street to his office. The days had not yet come when he could declare that "he never walked." He was always dressed with elegance and care, presenting in his appearance a strong contrast to the types which are sometimes to be seen in that part of London. His regularity was at that time remarked upon. He was, no doubt, making a strong effort to subject himself to discipline. At the same time, no doubt, the interest and dignity of his position appealed to his histrionic nature. He walked, an editor, amongst the proletarians of the press. He had the satis-

faction of showing that the part of journalist could be dressed by the tailors of Bond Street, the hatters and glovers of Piccadilly, and adorned by the florists of the Burlington Arcade—at a time, too, when he was, perhaps, one of the very poorest editors in London.

It appeared to his friends, at times, that he enjoyed the dignity, as well the meagre patronage of his editorial office. He was once heard to say, with some pride in his tones, speaking of his power of remunerating contributors : " I pay a guinea a page, no matter if most of the space is occupied by illustrations or not." That he had the interests of his employer at heart was shown by the fact that he never allowed feelings of friendship to interfere with the impartial performance of his duty as an editor. He was frequently applied to for commissions by needy Bohemian acquaintances, but where he considered that a man was not fitted to write for his periodical, he told him so. Lady Wilde and his wife contributed one or two articles each to *The Woman's World* during Oscar Wilde's editorship, but in every case the article on its own merits was well worthy of acceptance, and would have earned the fee paid from any editor in London. In the volume for 1889 we find from Lady Wilde's pen a collection of " Irish Peasant

Tales." There are five of these tales, "A Night with the Fairies," "A Legend of Shark," "Fairy Help," "The Western Isles," and "St Patrick and the Witch."

Constance Wilde's contribution during this year to the magazine of which her husband was editor is an illustrated, well "documented" paper on "Muffs," a good specimen of the "Museum-made" article.

It may be said that since the magistrate, Brillat-Savarin, wrote his "Physiologie du Goût," and showed that a cookery-book can be made a work of literary art, never has literary skill been put in stranger fashion at the service of the commonplaces of domestic life than appears in the pages of *The Woman's World* under Oscar Wilde's editorship. "Que diable allait-elle faire dans cette galère ?" might be asked of literature. The magazine was too admirable to succeed. Its style was too refined for the people to whom the subjects treated of appealed, and those people who might have delighted in the style were kept aloof by the subjects.

Oscar Wilde's personal contributions to this periodical—apart from certain articles on special literary subjects—took the form of a monthly *causerie*, published under the title of "Some Literary Notes." Considerable care and in-

dustry were expended by the editor on these articles. They usually occupied five pages of *The Woman's World*, and were quite the most interesting literary criticism then appearing in London. But what student of contemporary literature was going to hunt out these "literary notes" between an article on "The Gymnasium for Girls," by Mrs L. Ormiston Chant, and a paper on "Field-Work for Women," by Ouida.

Oscar Wilde's criticisms are always kindly, and full of instruction, which is just what criticism, if it is to have any value, should be. These pages are filled with *dicta* and epigram on the art of literature, which no future compiler of a complete edition of his works should fail to collect.

In the important matter of obtaining the services of distinguished people as contributors to his magazine, without possessing a free hand in fixing the scale of remuneration, Wilde was remarkably successful. During the first six months of 1899 he obtained for *The Woman's World* contributions from Oscar Browning, E. Nesbit, Annie Thomas, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Amy Levy, Ouida, Carmen Sylva, Blanche Roosevelt, the Countess of Portsmouth, St Heliers, Gleeson White, Miss Olive Schreiner, Lady Sandhurst, Miss F. L. Shaw, Miss Marie

Corelli, Arthur Symons, and Mrs Crawford. Marie Corelli's contribution was a long article on Shakespeare's mother, which at the present rates in the literary *Rialto* could probably be disposed of by an efficient agent for twenty times the amount which the editor of *The Woman's World* was enabled to offer.

It should be added that Oscar Wilde was an editor whom it was not easy to please. He would tolerate no slovenliness of writing. In the matter, for instance, of punctuation he was scrupulous in the extreme. If anywhere on a printed or manuscript page laid before him a poor little comma had intruded where it had no right to be, or one had deserted its post, his flashing glance would immediately turn to the spot. One of his stories was that his hostess in a country house having asked him at dinner how he had spent the day he had answered: "I have been correcting the proofs of my poems. In the morning, after hard work, I took a comma out of one sentence." "And in the afternoon?" "In the afternoon, I put it back again." He was here jesting at what was a marked characteristic of his literary technique.

During all this time, apart from his editorship, he was a frequent contributor to the weekly and daily press, as well as to the

magazines. He wrote anonymously for *The Pall Mall Gazette*, in whose columns he revealed himself as a brilliant paragraphist, who did not disdain the piquancy of personalities; he contributed much to *The World* under Yates's editorship; his name is to be found under many magazine articles which have long since been forgotten. One remembers, for instance, an article on "London Models" which appeared in *The English Illustrated Magazine* (vol. vi. 1888-1889), which is a good specimen of purely journalistic work.

It was not till a year or two later that he began to speak with such detestation of journalists. It is possible that it had taken him just so long to discover that the reputations which are made by newspapers have no real foundation in the hearts of the people, that interviews and paragraphs, and the whole gamut of periodical puffery, although they may make a person notorious, do not bestow upon him that popularity which is associated with the substantial benefices of fame. It is an experience which most public men have made; and those who have expected great results from the persistent clamour of the journalists, do often, when disappointed in these expectations, manifest rancour and resentment towards those whom at an

earlier date they fostered. From a very early stage in his career Oscar Wilde had been one of the men in England whose names were most widely known—he himself once said that a year or two after he came to London his name was a household word throughout the country—but naturally as long as his reputation rested alone on this foundation he got nothing from it but such enjoyment as vanity might thence derive, and it is possible, what has been noticed in many other instances, that a peevish resentment arising from his disappointment prompted him to that contumely of journalists which unfortunately he continued to display long after real service to the public had brought true fame and its tangible rewards.

In the days of his own connection with the periodical press he sometimes used to speak in praise of certain of the characteristics of journalism. After the appointment of his brother William Wilde to the staff of *The Daily Telegraph* he was heard to say: "There is a great fascination in journalism. It is so quick, so swift. Willy goes to a Duchess's ball, he slips out before midnight, is away for an hour or two, returns, and as he is driving home in the morning, can buy the paper containing a full account of the party which he has just left." Like every-

St. Mary's COLLEGE LIBRARY

body else in England he expressed the greatest admiration for the work which his brother did in reporting the judicial proceedings of the Parnell commission. Yet in 1891, a bare year after he had turned his back on Fleet Street, he wrote that passage on British journalism which occurs in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," which aroused against him the terrible hatred, suppressed at the time, which blazed forth at the time of his fall. One extract from this passage will suffice here. "In centuries before ours the public nailed the ears of journalists to the pump. That was quite hideous. In this century journalists have nailed their own ears to the keyhole. That is much worse." This vituperation of journalists was a constant feature of his conversation during the next few years. He frequently requested his brother not to dare speak to him of his "vile gutter friends from Fleet Street." He never missed an opportunity of insulting the press in his plays.

If there was ever any truth in the statement which has been frequently made that at one time in his life Oscar Wilde thirsted after newspaper notoriety with the eagerness of which certain contemporary writers afford so painful an example, it is a fact that when "The Ideal

Husband" was being written he had entirely set his face against it. In January 1895 he was approached by the Messrs M'Clure, of *M'Clure's Magazine,* who were anxious to publish about him an article in the form of an interview. It should be stated that this magazine was already at that time a great power in the United States, and that the foremost writers and celebrities in other walks of life in all parts of the world had been glad to avail themselves of a publicity so beneficial and far-reaching. The writing of this article was to be done by one of Wilde's oldest friends, whose name was widely known in America in connection with work of this kind. The request of the Messrs M'Clure was answered by Oscar Wilde in a letter which he wrote from Tite Street to this friend, in which he said that he did not like the tone of his editor's letter—that to speak of wishing for "Oscariana" was an impertinence—that he understood that it was usual that a fee should be paid to the person interviewed, and that he would in no way assist in the production of the article unless he first received a cheque for £20. As at that time such a sum was of no importance to him whatever, and as in any other way he would have been glad to assist his old friend in his work, this letter affords good proof that personal advertisement

by newspaper publicity had become entirely distasteful to him.

He was consistent in this dislike until the end. It occurred to some of his friends who watched him during his second Trial at the Old Bailey that the way in which on the posters of the newspapers his name was placarded all over London afforded him some satisfaction, and a remark of his on the subject is on record;[1] but this may be explained by that natural and pathetic prompting that moves every poor mortal to endeavour to find in any great personal disaster some scrap of consolation.

In his greatest distress, at a time when he needed money most badly, after his ruin had been consummated, he refused the most substantial offers from the proprietors of newspapers, and not only from those who merely wished to trade in the notoriety of his name. After his release from prison, while he was living in Berneval, it was suggested to Fernaud Xau, the proprietor of *Le Journal*, one of the principal papers in Paris, that Oscar Wilde could write effective articles on various questions of

[1] "The town was placarded with his name; and one night, alluding to this, I said: 'Well, you have got your name before the public at last.' He laughed, and said: 'Nobody can pretend now not to have heard it.' 'Oscar Wilde. The Story of an Unhappy Friendship'"

literature and art on which his authority was uncontested. Xau agreed to place his name on his list of contributors, which included many of the leading politicians and all the foremost literary celebrities of France. The terms he offered as remuneration were the same as those paid to the first writers. There was here no suggestion at all that Oscar Wilde's collaboration was desired because the scandal which attached to his name would appeal to the morbid-minded, and create a profitable sensation. It was a plain, business-like offer from a very shrewd business-man to a writer of eminent and recognised capacity. It was a proposal which most authors of high standing and European reputation would have taken as a compliment. Yet, although at that time Oscar Wilde was in sad difficulties through want of money, he declined the offer without one moment's consideration. This refusal was courteously worded ; it was with scathing contempt that he repelled any approaches from the traffickers in sensation. It is reported that when, just previous to his release from Reading Gaol, the Governor informed him that the correspondents of an American paper who had been waiting in Reading for some days past were prepared to pay him a very large fee for the privilege of

being allowed to interview him on the subject of his prison experiences he expressed his surprise that any one should venture to make such proposals to a gentleman.

Some time previous to this release he had been speaking to a person in the prison about his future prospects. He had said that poverty awaited him outside the prison-gates. His friend said that "by writing an article or two for the monthlies he would be able to earn an immediate supply of money." "Ah," said Oscar Wilde, "I remember when one editor of the *Nineteenth Century* used to come to my house and solicit an article, and now I suppose he wouldn't accept one were I to offer it for nothing."

This friend in relating this conversation adds: "I endeavoured to make as light of his troubles as possible, and assured him that all he required was pen, ink and paper. 'My friend,' he said—he repeated these words on several occasions—'You do not know the world as well as I do. Some people might read what I chose to write out of morbidness, but I don't want that, I wish to be read for Art's sake, not for my notoriety.'"

His only contributions to journalism, after he left prison, were the long letters which he wrote under the title of "The Case of Warder Martin," on "Some Cruelties of Prison Life," and the letter

"Don't Read This if you wish to be Happy To-Day." These appeared in *The Daily Chronicle* on Friday, 28th May 1897, and on 24th March 1898, respectively. Of these letters it need only be said of them that they were written from a pure spirit of philanthropy. No self-interest prompted its author to take pen in hand. It is a fact, which should be recorded here, that when he wrote the first letter he was extremely doubtful whether the editor would venture to publish it. It should be added in proof that gain was not his motive, that although a friend, the editor of one of the most important reviews in London, would, as he knew, have paid almost any fee for this contribution, he preferred to give it to the world through the agency of a daily paper, because he considered first that this exposure of abuses and cruelty should not be delayed one day longer than could be avoided, and secondly that the wider publicity of a newspaper with a great circulation would more effectively arouse public opinion. The amount of the fee paid to him, if any fee was paid, is not known, but it certainly did not exceed if indeed it reached the foison of the sums which out of a meagre purse, at a time of great need, he gave away to his poor comrades in misfortune, those who had been prisoners with him in Reading Gaol.

CHAPTER XIII

Some Traits of his Character—Oscar Wilde in Matters of Money—His Extreme Delicacy of Feeling—Oscar Wilde as a Talker—The Testimony of a Gentleman of Letters—And of a Man of Action—Oscar Wilde as a Man of Action—The Reasons of his Popularity—His Small Actual Production—His Immense Real Output—The Value of his Work—The Testimony of a Scholar—"The Picture of Dorian Gray"—How it was Written—The Refutation of a Charge—Wilde and Henley.

ALTHOUGH during the first years of his married life Oscar Wilde's difficulties were often very great, not on one single occasion in the whole of his life—even in the starveling years after his release from prison—did he obtain or attempt to obtain resources by any means unworthy of proper pride, of self-respect, of delicacy. He loved money for the pleasures that it commands; but he did not love it enough to let it soil his lordly hands. In this respect his pride reached to arrogance. In money matters he was the soul of honour—another point in his character which in a commercial country and amongst the Bohemians of art and letters would win little recognition. His generosity was unbounded. "I have no sense of property," he used to say;

HENRI DE REGNIER,

Author of a striking monograph on Oscar Wilde, for whom he expresses great admiration. Monsieur de Régnier is a distinguished poet and novelist. He married a daughter of the late academician, José de Hérédia.

but he did not add that for the property of others he had a respect as stern as to his own belongings he was totally indifferent. "Friends always share," he wrote to a man at Reading, who had been good to him. He was praying his acceptance of a sum of money, for the man had lost his employment. This man, just before Oscar Wilde's release, had begged him, knowing that the prisoner was penniless, and greatly concerned as to his position, to accept the loan of five pounds which he had saved up. With the most delightful badinage did C. 3.3. refuse the offer. He pretended that to a man of his extravagance such a sum would be useless. All this was so as to refuse without hurting the feelings of his friend a sum of money which to a working-man meant much. In the end he said that if things came to the worst and he did wake up one morning to find himself without a breakfast he would write for the five pounds and "buy a sandwich with it." The man said: "And a cigar." "I hardly think that it would run to that," said Oscar, "but if there is anything over I will buy a postage stamp and write to acknowledge the money." His generosity even was misconstrued. Gifts which had been made by him out of sheer kindness of heart were represented as bribes for nameless purposes.

Towards his mother his liberality knew no limits. For years before his fall he maintained her in the affluence which she enjoyed.

During the eight years 1884-1891, although the total of his published work was not great, and judged by its quantity alone the man may be considered not to have greatly progressed, his development of those qualities and talents which were his especial distinction was as astounding as it was delightful. Those years were to the people who came into contact with him memorable as a succession of the rarest intellectual banquets. His spendthrift genius kept open house. He spoke, and those who heard him wondered why the whole world was not listening. There never can have been in the world's history a talker more delightful. A great lady said of him to Henri de Régnier that when Oscar Wilde was speaking it seemed to her that a luminous aureole surrounded his noble head. This remark is also repeated and confirmed by the testimony of Jean Joseph-Renaud.

Henri de Régnier, that *gentilhomme de lettres* in the republic of literature, the elegant and delicate writer of the daintiest prose in the French language, the poet of distinction, the novelist of refinement, pays in his book of essays

Figures et Caractères a tribute to Oscar Wilde which (for nobility always *does* compel) he made public at a time when to write in praise of him was to court obloquy and foul suspicion. Writing of the impression which in those days Oscar Wilde produced in Paris he says :—

" He pleased, he amused, he astounded. People grew enthusiastic about him ; people were fanatics where he was concerned." It should be noted that Henri de Régnier speaks here of the highest Parisian society, the *milieu* in which he himself, an elegant man of the world, moves. He describes the dinner at which the lady referred to above made her memorable pronouncement. " The dinner, elegant and prolonged, was held in a luxurious room, brilliantly lighted. Scented violets were banked up on the cloth. In the cut-crystal glasses champagne sparkled ; fruits were being peeled with knives of gold. M. Wilde was speaking. There had been invited to meet him certain guests who were not talkative, and who were disposed to listen to him with pleasure. Of this conversation and of others I have kept a vivacious and lasting remembrance. M. Wilde spoke in French with an eloquence and a tact which were far from common. His expressions were embellished

with words which had been most judiciously selected. As a scholar of Oxford, M. Wilde could as easily have employed Latin or Greek. He loved the Greek and Roman antiquities. His *causerie* was all purely imaginative. He was an incomparable teller of tales ; he knew thousands of stories which linked themselves one to the other in an endless chain."

Henri de Régnier here remarks what anyone who with due attention reads Oscar Wilde's fairy stories will observe :—

" This " (by telling stories) " was his way of saying everything, of expressing his opinion on every subject : it was the figurative hypocrisy of this thought " (the way in which he veiled his thoughts) . . .

" One might not press M. Wilde too closely for the meaning of his allegories. One had to enjoy their grace and the unexpected turns he gave to his narratives, without seeking to raise the veil of this phantasmagoria of the mind which made of his conversation a kind of ' Thousand and One Nights ' as spoken.

" The gold-tipped cigarette went out and lighted itself again incessantly in the lips of the story-teller. As his hand moved with a slow gesture the *scarabæus* of his ring threw off its green lights. The face kept changing its ex-

JEAN JOSEPH-RENAUD, TRANSLATOR OF "INTENTIONS," AND AUTHOR OF A MOST INTERESTING MONOGRAPH ON OSCAR WILDE. MONSIEUR RENAUD IS THE BEST GENTLEMAN FENCER IN FRANCE.

pression with the most amusing mimicry, the voice flowed on unceasingly, dragging a little, always equal.

"M. Wilde was persuasive and astonishing. He excelled in giving a certificate of truth to what was improbable. The most doubtful statement when uttered by him assumed for the moment the aspect of indisputable truth. Of fable he made a thing which had happened actually, from a thing which had actually happened he drew out a fable. He listened to the *Schéhérazade* that was prompting him from within, and seemed himself first of all to be amazed at his strange and fabulous inventions. This particular gift made of M. Wilde's conversation something very distinct amongst contemporary *causeries*. It did not, for instance, resemble the profound and precise ingenuity of M. Stéphane Mallarmé, which explained facts and things in a manner so delicate and exact. It had nothing of the varied, anecdotic talk of M. Alphonse Daudet with his striking *aperçus* on men and things. Nor did it resemble in any way the paradoxical beauty of the sayings of M. Paul Adam, or the biting acridity of M. Henri Becque. M. Wilde used to tell his stories like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam told them. . . . M. Wilde charmed and amused, and he gave one the

impression that he was a happy man—at ease in life."

This is the impression of Oscar Wilde as recorded by a man of letters who is also a man of the world, member of the best and most refined society in Paris. We are able to give in contrast another picture of Wilde in Paris, as a *causeur*, by another man of letters of high distinction, Monsieur Jean Joseph-Renaud, whose testimony should be of special value in England. Jean Joseph-Renaud is one of the finest athletes in France. There is nothing morbid, nor decadent, nor pessimistic about him. He can box, both in the English and the French styles; he is a sportsman in every sense of the word, and he has the distinction of being the best gentleman fencer in France. He is well known amongst English swordsmen, and has given them cause to remember him. Those who witnessed his performances at the tournament at the Crystal Palace a year or two ago will be able to confirm the statement that there is nothing morbid, nor effete, about Jean Joseph-Renaud, and that what he says about Wilde is sincere and from the heart. The following true account of his first meeting with Oscar Wilde, and of the effect which he produced upon the company in that house in Paris has been described by a

great English novelist, who is at the same time our sternest literary critic, as masterly in its truthful representation of the man described. It shows us Wilde wishing at any cost to "amaze," and having failed in his first manner readily adopting another mode in which he triumphed, carrying all before him. The passage is from the preface to Monsieur Jean Joseph-Renaud's excellent translation of "Intentions." Renaud was a mere lad when he first met Wilde at the house of some of Mrs Wilde's relations in Paris. This is what he writes :—

"When, an hour late, Mr Wilde entered the drawing-room, we saw a tall gentleman, who was too stout, who was clean-shaven, and who differed from any *Auteuil* bookmaker, by clothes in better taste than a bookmaker wears, by a voice which was exquisitely musical, and by the pure blue light, almost like that of a child's eyes, which shone in his look. In his bulky cravat of greenish silk an amethyst sparkled with a subdued light ; his grey gloves, which were so fine as to be almost transparent, moulded his graceful hands ; an orchid was shrivelling itself up in his button-hole. Without listening to the names of the people who were introduced to him he sat down, and with an air of exhaustion begged Madame Lloyd to order the

shutters of the dining-room to be closed and candles to be lighted. He said that he could not possibly stand the light of day. . . .

"The table decorations had to be altered, because the mauve flowers would have brought him bad luck. Then, as soon as the *hors d'œuvres* had been served he took definite possession of the conversation. What a disappointment awaited us. He spoke 'pretentiously,' asked questions, and did not wait for the replies, or addressed himself to people with too great directness; 'You have never seen a ghost? No! Oh! Now you, Madame, yes, you, Madame, your eyes seem to have contemplated ghosts. . . .' Then he declared that one night in a bar each table was put in its place, and the floor was swept, not by waiters, but by 'the angels of the close of the day.' His British accent reminded us of Sarah Bernhardt. . . . He next began to tell us, speaking almost in whispers, as though he were telling us secrets, and using mysterious phrases, some poetical and simple tales . . . about a young fisherman who pretends every night as he returns from the sea to have seen syrens; one day he really does see a syren, but when he comes home he does not say so . . . about a sculptor who with the bronze of a statue of 'Pain Which Lives for Ever' moulds

the statue of 'Pleasure which Lasts but for one Moment.' Next he returned to what was *macabre*, and described at length the sensations which a visit to the Morgue in the different capitals of the world procures to a man. We found in M. Wilde the hoaxing cynicism of Baudelaire and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as it appeared through an English medium. Already that fashion of amazing people seemed much out of date, and to this audience of intelligent *bourgeois* it was successful only in the bad sense of the word. The poet noticed this. He kept silent during the rest of the meal. But later on in the drawing-room, while coffee was being served, the conversation having turned on the success of a French comedy in England and Germany, he gently suggested that our prodigious theatrical instinct explains many of our acts; French foreign politics, for instance, are theatrical; they aim rather at the finest attitude, the most striking phrases, the most effective gestures, than at any practical successes. He then examined our history at length, from Charles X. up to modern times, from a paradoxical point of view. His conversation transformed itself, he displayed extraordinary knowledge and wit. Men, deeds, treaties, wars passed under review with appreciations, unsuspected, amusing,

exact. He made them glitter under the light of his words, even as a jeweller awakes new lights in his gems.

"He then went on to talk about Lady Blessington and Disraeli.

"To tell us of the pains of love of Lady Blessington he little by little raised himself to a lofty and intoxicating lyricism; his fine voice hymned, grew tender, rang out, like a viol, in the midst of the emotional silence. This Englishman, who just before had appeared grotesque, reached, reached with simplicity, ay, surpassed, the expressive power of the most admirable odes of humanity. Many of us were moved to tears. One had never thought that the words of man could attain to such splendour. And this took place in a drawing-room, and the man who was speaking never spoke otherwise than as a man speaks in a drawing-room. We could understand that a great lady had said of him: 'When he is speaking I see round his head a luminous aureole.'"

Many Parisians who heard him in those days found apt the comparison which an English friend of his writing in the *Gaulois* had traced between his sayings and the largesse of his wit and the jewels of Buckingham at the Court of France. "Ses mots," so ran the phrase, "se

répandaient autour de lui comme autour de Buckingham, à la cour de France, se répandaient les bijoux par calcul mal attachés au pourpoint scintillant."

Padraic Colum, the young Irish poet, to whom his admirers look for such great things, describes in one of his poems in a very striking way how treasures for the future are laid up in the minds of men by the words of a teacher.

> "But what avail my teaching slight ?
> Years hence in rustic speech, a phrase
> As in wild earth a Grecian vase."

To Oscar Wilde, the talker, posterity will owe a great debt.

His voice was inimitable, though in itself an imitation. He had robbed Sarah Bernhardt of her golden voice, but he put the larceny to such a use that the crime became an act of social virtue. The most wonderful things said in the golden voice of the most wonderful woman : that was the conversation of Oscar Wilde. To have heard him speak has made the fortune of innumerable little men. There are *homunculi* triumphing in the drawing-rooms of the two hemispheres, who only faintly echo his manner. The smallest small change from his royal storehouse has made hundreds appear rich. Out of the tatters of his imperial mantle, which dis-

aster dragged in the mire, many writers, many speakers, have cut for themselves resplendent robes in which they strut their small parades and enjoy their tiny triumphs. One constantly sees in modern literature books which bear upon the face of them the proof that the author's whole equipment was that he "remembers to have heard Oscar Wilde speaking." One of the most successful books which has appeared in France during the last fifteen years, a work which is hailed as an artistic masterpiece, and which at the same time is a huge commercial success, is just Wilde talking. "Il passa sa vie à se parler," and the irony of the gods sentenced him to the silence of the tomb in the two most fruitful years of his life, when his genius had reached its apogee!

It was in his wonderful conversation that he found an issue for the bubbling energy of his brain, for his supreme activity. For we have always to remember that Oscar Wilde was a man of action, condemned by the social order of things to inactivity. It is, probably, because Jean Joseph-Renaud, himself a man of action, recognises this energy in Oscar Wilde also that he has espoused his cause and his defence with ardour so zealous. To the man of action absolute inactivity is physically impossible, and

as he must be doing he will perform antics rather than do nothing. Many of the apparent buffooneries which in his youth were reproached against Oscar Wilde were the result merely of a chafing exuberance. He sought, indeed, saner outlets, and his misfortune was that circumstances ever barred the way. It is a fact that at one time not long after his marriage he was seriously considering the question of presenting himself as a candidate for Parliament. It is deeply to be regretted that his poverty prevented the realisation of this project. In a political career there was no height to which he could not have aspired. He had every one of the gifts that would have made of him in diplomacy an ornament and a treasure to the State. He would have filled the House of Commons with delight. He was a born orator. This he attributed himself to his nationality. Speaking of the Irish, he once said, referring to himself, in that self-accusing way which was one of the pathetic traits of his character: "We are too poetical to be poets. We are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks." He had all the compelling power of great orators. He could move his audience by the sheer beauty of his tones. We have heard Renaud's testimony. Here is another

instance : when he was lecturing in Dublin the audience was not at all sympathetic. His opening remark, " Let there be nothing in your houses which was not a joy to the man who made it," was received with ironical laughter. He immediately went off into a eulogy of Ireland, and gradually worked his hostile audience into sympathy which reached the culminating point of enthusiasm when he declared in accents which filled many eyes with tears : " When the heart of a nation is broken, it is broken in music." It was by his manner of speaking to women and children that he won such undying admirations from them. A charming scene is related by an Irish poet who was lunching once at Oakley Street with Oscar Wilde. Amongst the guests was a pretty girl, who was barely seventeen years old, and who had come up to town for her first season. When Oscar came in the girl exclaimed : " Oh ! Mr Wilde, where are your curls ? "

" Oh ! " said Oscar, " I never wear them after the season is over."

" But, Mr Wilde, your curls are real ones ! "

" Oh ! No ! I keep them in a bandbox at home. I will put them on and wear them for you the next time you come."

It was all so prettily said, with such kindness

and humanity that that girl, remembering the encounter, and having come to know how other men would have spoken, could not help but think of the poor gentleman with grateful tenderness.

At a dinner given by Mr Frank Harris in honour of the Princess of Monaco, one of our most distinguished novelists, who had been estranged from Oscar Wilde during ten years, was introduced to him afresh. "That night," he relates, "Oscar Wilde's conversation was of the most extraordinary brilliancy. He subjugated us all. For my part I found him most delightful, and thought with regret of all the pleasure which I had missed during the ten years in which we had avoided each other." On the morning after that dinner, the Princess sent her portrait to Oscar Wilde, and on it she had written the words :

"Au vrai Art, A Oscar Wilde."

In prison he seems to have preserved his power of repartee. There are things on record which were there spoken in the watchful whispers of those who are dumb by law and under penalty, and which scintillate with wit. When freedom released his tongue his friends found that he had never been more brilliant. Ernest La Jeunesse in an article which reaches that high point of

literary excellence that it may be said of it that it is a tribute to the great man about whom it was written, gives a striking picture of this dying eloquence.

" He is haunted with a foreboding of death, which in the end will kill him. He then tells all his stories in one breath : it is the bitter yet dazzling final piece of a display of superhuman fireworks. Those, who, at the end of his life, heard him unravel the skein of gold and jewelled threads, the strong subtleties, the psychic and fantastic inventions with which he proposed to sew and embroider the tapestry of the plays and poems which he was going to write, those who saw him proud and indifferent, affronting extinction and coughing or laughing out his ultimate phrasings, will keep the remembrance of a sight at once tragic and lofty, the sight of a man damned yet impassive, who refuses to perish altogether."

Another picture of Oscar Wilde as a talker, at this time in his life when the voice was so soon to be hushed, is given by one who had known him for years, and who saw him in those last days. It was not a friend.

" Of course, he had his bad moments, moments of depression and sense of loss and defeat, but they were not of long duration. It was part of

his pose to luxuriate a little in the details of his tragic circumstances. He harrowed the feelings of many of those whom he came across ; words of woe poured from his lips ; he painted an image of himself, destitute, abandoned, starving even (I have heard him use the word after a very good dinner at Paillard's) ; as he proceeded he was caught by the pathos of his own words, his beautiful voice trembled with emotion, his eyes swam with tears ; and then suddenly, by a swift, indescribably brilliant, whimsical touch, a swallow-wing flash on the waters of eloquence, the tone changed and rippled with laughter, bringing with it his audience, relieved, delighted, and bubbling into uncontrollable merriment. He never lost his marvellous gift of talking ; after he came out of prison he talked better than before. Everyone who knew him really before and after his imprisonment is agreed about that." [1]

He had the delightful way of speaking to the poor, to inferiors as society calls them, which distinguishes gentlemen. Amongst this class he enjoyed great popularity. He is still remembered by them. In a recent letter a gentleman writes : " By a queer coincidence my cook was once in his service. She has nothing but good

[1] From an article signed " A " in *The St James's Gazette*.

to say of him and of 'his sweet face.'" One could adduce hundreds of similar testimonies. In Reading Gaol he was the most popular prisoner, not only with the prisoners but with the warders. At Berneval Monsieur "Sebastian Melmoth" was the *coqueluche* of the village. The peasants adored him; the village children loved him; and the coast-guardsmen were Melmoth's men to a man. He had eminently that quality of ingratiating himself with the humble, without sacrificing a tittle of his dignity, to which the Germans give the name of "leutselig." There is no English equivalent for this word; "affable" does not render it. The French spoke of him as *un homme doux*. He was a kind-hearted gentleman, nothing more.

It is possible that a pathologist would have seen in the extraordinary brilliancy of Oscar Wilde's talk, in its unceasing flow and the apparently inexhaustible resources of wit and knowledge on which he drew, the prodromes of the disease of which he died. The cause of his death was meningitis, which is an inflammation of the brain, and it is possible that for many years before this disease killed him it may have existed in a subacute and chronic state which might account for the almost feverish energy of his cerebration. But to the ordinary man

no saner, no serener, speaker ever appeared. He seemed at all times master of himself; it was, indeed, this perfect *maestria* of his powers of conversation which so astounded those who approached him. When one comes to think of the matter why should not Oscar Wilde's friends be satisfied that his memory should go down to the after-ages as that of one of the most brilliant talkers who ever lived? There are men high in humanity's Walhalla who left little behind them but the echoes of their voice. The greatest philosophers, the men who gave new religions to the world, did not write; they talked. Did Christ write, did Mahound write, did Socrates write? If Oscar Wilde had had the fortune to find amongst his associates a disciple who would have taken the trouble to record his teachings—for he was always teaching—when he spoke, he would have been remembered in the world's history as one of the wisest of philosophers. He was the head of a new school of philosophy; his philosophy had in its tenets the real secret of human happiness, and what grander eulogy can there be for any school than that? He was an optimist who understood to the very extremest extent why mankind is prone to pessimism. He felt keener than most men the horrors of life, the cruelties of the world, the desperate sufferings

that social injustice inflicts, and yet he had found a way to happiness out of all these evil things. Nobody could listen to him without being benefited. His talk was a cry of *Sursum Corda*. He taught you to know evil, and by deriding it to enjoy good. What reason was there that he should write at all ?

Yet he was always blaming himself for his indolence. He had acquired Carlyle's table for his study, and sometimes sitting at it, toying with his pen, he used to say : " I ought to be putting black upon white, black upon white." Those years may have appeared barren to himself, who was always self-accusing ; and those who measure genius by its output may point to his small production when they deny the genius of Oscar Wilde. Yet there are many who find that what he did write during that period of his life was sufficient to give him a very high place in English literature and amongst the philosophers of the world. These deny that he was in the right when he once said plaintively : " I have put my genius into my life ; into my books I have put my talents only." The effect that has been produced by his essay " The Soul of Man," which originally appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* in February 1891, has been described. It brings hope and comfort to

thousands of the world's most cruelly disinherited. Who shall say what has been the wide-spreading and most beneficial influence of that marvellous book "Intentions"? Let one testimony be quoted. It is that of a man of the very highest scholarship and learning in England, whose bent has led him specially to study the religions and the philosophical systems of the world. "My experience may be interesting," he writes in a letter. "After taking a high degree in Classics at Cambridge, and then reading literature and science, for mere love of beauty and truth, I happened after about six years of this, to come across 'Intentions.' This first reading showed me something different from any other writer; I seemed to see the meaning of literature and art as I never had before; in fact he taught me the secret I had always missed. I said: 'Never man spoke like this man.' It was a revelation; more so than when I read Plato. I secured all his books I could. Every friend of mine with any culture or insight seems to have the same experience on reading him. This is really a remarkable fact, and when my first judgment of him, as the best of them all, was always inviting reconsideration in my own mind, as too remarkable to be true, I found others holding the same judgment. . . . I have

always had what I don't like to call an infallible taste in art and literature—my friend . . . can say something as to that—but I mention this absurdly egoistic belief simply because at first I had at times a lurking suspicion that my taste must be wrong, because of my estimate of Wilde. But I have never found reason to alter it." The name of the friend whom the writer quotes as his surety is, indeed, a patent of critical taste in literature, scholarship and art.

"Intentions," "The Soul of Man," his Fairy-stories "The Happy Prince," and "The House of Pomegranates": it was in these books that his philosophy was expounded. The only other work of importance which he published during this period—that is to say, from the date of his marriage until 1892, when he came to popularity and its dangers—was his novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray." This story was written to the order of the proprietors of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, an American periodical which in 1890 was publishing a complete novel by some author of repute as a supplement to the other contents. Oscar Wilde was one of the men who were invited by the editor to contribute a complete tale. When to a literary artist is given an order to produce a work of a certain length in a certain time, the result is rarely, from the point of view

of art, a satisfactory one. The book must from its very nature smack of artificiality. It is the manufactured article, not the spontaneous creation of art. Oscar Wilde was at that time when the order reached him in considerable financial embarrassment, and people who saw him then, remember how delighted he was, poor fellow, with an order, which promised him a welcome emolument. It is not conceivable that under these circumstances he would deliberately write a book of corrupt morals, calculated to pervert. He was too anxious to fill the contract with satisfaction to the proprietors of the magazine. It would have been a disaster to him if the editor of *Lippincott's* had refused the manuscript on the ground that the work was an immoral one, unfit for publication in the pages of a household magazine. This entirely disposes of the absurd charge that in writing "Dorian Gray" Oscar Wilde set himself the task of producing a corrupt book. There are people who found it so. This was one of the charges which were brought against him at the trial. He defended himself with splendid folly. If he had simply stated the facts he would have found the defence far more effective with an Old Bailey jury. "I was poor," he might have said, "at the time when I was asked to write that book. If the manuscript

had dissatisfied the editor and he had returned it I could not have enforced payment if the book was an immoral one and I had deliberately written it so. Therefore it is absurd to say that I wrote it as an immoral book." It is difficult to understand what grounds there are for so qualifying this book. It seems to any man of the world who reads it that the author is almost too emphatic in his homily against vice. He thumps his cushion with such vigour that he really jars upon one's nerves. One wonders what these vices may be which call forth such vigour of denunciation. He reminds one of Calvin, if one could associate Calvin with anything that is graceful and delicate. The book might be described as silly, as obviously intended to *épater les sots*, for one knows of all the nasty little vices of silly little men, and the contemplation of them certainly does not excite one to any feeling of tragic horror. The whole thing is entirely artificial. It is literature, not life, and that is perhaps the cruellest thing that one says about a work which professes to be a novel. How purely Oscar Wilde in those days looked upon this book, not as the exposition of any particular creed of his, but as an article of commerce, produced to order, for payment, for the middle-class market, is shown by the

fact that when he was arranging to issue the book in volume form, and it was pointed out to him that the length of the manuscript did not reach the tare exacted by the trade for goods of that kind, he willingly supplied sufficient additional matter to make up the required weight. Works of art are not thus produced. The book was a commercial speculation ; he wanted money for it, and from it, and he was much too level-headed a man to spoil his chances of a financial success by publishing anything which would fatally damn the book. If there be such hideous immorality in the book as certain perceive, Oscar Wilde must have written it unconsciously. His particular mania was decidedly epileptiform ; and a characteristic of those maladies is that the sufferers do things, being entirely unconscious that they are doing them. In this case " Dorian Gray " would be the best documentary evidence of the poor man's irresponsibility for the mad acts which later disfigured his career. The whole pother about " Dorian Gray " is only an exemplification of the saying of the French *argousin* : " Give me three lines of any man's writing and I will hang him."

The book was not very well received. It was not at the time a commercial success. The reviewers were not enthusiastic. In the

Athenæum for 27th June 1891 we find the following brief notice of this book :—

" Mr Oscar Wilde's paradoxes are less wearisome when introduced into the chatter of society than when he rolls them off in the course of his narrative. Some of the conversations in his novel are very smart, and while reading it one has the pleasant feeling, not often to be enjoyed, of being entertained by a person of decided ability. The ideas of the book may have been suggested by Balzac's ' Peau de Chagrin,' and is none the worse for that. So much may be said for the ' Picture of Dorian Gray,' but no more, except, perhaps, that the author does not appear to be in earnest. For the rest, the book is unmanly, vicious (though not exactly what is called improper) and tedious."

In November of the same year there appeared the first number of *The Bookman*, a literary organ which specially appeals to the middle-classes, and where books are mainly considered from the bookseller's point of view. The editor, Dr Robertson Nicoll, is a very shrewd man, who would have been the last person in the world to allow a book of patent immorality to be noticed in his columns. Yet not only did he allow it to be reviewed, at length, but he entrusted the reviewing of it to no less a person

than Walter Pater, which meant that every lover of literature in the world almost would read the review of "Dorian Gray." Walter Pater's review is finely written, but it hardly enables one to ascertain what was his true opinion of the book. What he says about its author himself is, perhaps, more interesting and may be quoted :—

"There is always something of an excellent talker about the writings of Mr Oscar Wilde ; and in his hands, as happens so rarely with those who practise it, the form of dialogue is justified by its being really alive. His genial laughter-loving sense of life and its enjoyable intercourse goes far to obviate any crudity that may be in the paradox, with which, as with the bright and shining truth which often underlies it, Mr Wilde startling his 'countrymen' carries on, more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold. 'The Decay of Lying,' for instance, is all but unique in its half humorous, yet wholly convinced, presentment of certain valuable truths of criticism. Conversational ease, the fluidity of life, felicitous expression are qualities which have a natural alliance to the successful writing of fiction ; and side by side with Mr Wilde's 'Intentions' (so he entitles his critical efforts) comes a novel,

certainly original, and affording the reader a fair opportunity of comparing his practice as a creative artist with many a precept he has denounced as critic concerning it."

Lower down Walter Pater says: "A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr Wilde's hero—his heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can—is to lose, or lower organism, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. . . . Dorian himself, though certainly a quite unsuccessful experiment in Epicureanism, in life as a fine art is (till his inward spoiling takes visible effect suddenly, and in a moment, at the end of his story) a beautiful creation. But his story is also a vivid, though carefully considered exposure of the corruption of a soul, with a very plain moral, pushed home, to the effect that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly. . . ."

It is one of the strangest things in literary history that this book should have been indicted as an immoral work wilfully written to corrupt the reader.

Oscar Wilde was indignant with his critics, and in *The Daily Chronicle* for 2nd July 1890,

and *The Scots Observer* for 12th July, 2nd August, and 16th, he published certain "replies" to these criticisms. One of his remarks has often been quoted. He said that he did not wish to become a popular novelist. "It is far too easy," he said. *The Scots Observer*, which afterwards became *The National Observer*, was under the direction of Mr Henley, who was considered an arbiter in matters of literature. Oscar Wilde had considerable admiration for this man. He is reported to have said: "The Essays of the *Renaissance* are my Golden Book. I never travel without them. But it is the very flower of the Decadence. The last trumpet should have sounded at the moment it was written." A man who was present said: "But Mr Wilde, won't you give us time to read them?" "Oh, for that," said Oscar Wilde, "you will have time in either world." After his first meeting with Henley during which while the editor of *The Scots Observer* was grim and sardonic and said nothing, while Oscar was exceptionally brilliant, he said: "I had to strain every nerve in conversation to equal Henley." Henley afterwards remarked of Wilde: "He is the sketch of a great man."

Oscar's brilliant endowments had won him many enemies. He was widely envied. But

his detractors had the sop of consolation that in the commercial sense of the word he was not successful. They were able to point to a very great number of writers, journalists and novelists who were making very much larger incomes than Oscar Wilde. This was not difficult, for he was making no income at all. In a commercial country where repute goes by earnings, and talent is estimated by what it produces in actual hard cash, it was an easy matter under these circumstances for Oscar's enemies to deny that he had any talent at all. They did not fail to take advantage of the opportunity. Until the end of 1891 it was the common comment on him that he had advertised himself into notoriety by posturings of various kinds, but that there was really nothing in him ; that the public had " no use for him," and, that but for his wife's income he would have found his social level long since. These statements gave pleasure and solace to the jealous. The time was close at hand when Oscar Wilde was to show them that he understood as well as any man the secret of great popularity, and that he *could* make money with his pen. After the brilliant success of his first play, " Lady Windermere's Fan," it was no longer open to people to say that the public would have none of him. It created great heart-

burnings in London, much hypertrophy of the gall-bladders. Yet, if his enemies could only have foreseen to what disaster success was to hurry him, none more eagerly than they would have joined in the frantic applause with which every night his theatre rang.

CHAPTER XIV

Annus Mirabilis—"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime"—Mrs Wilde's Copy—Lady Windermere's Fan—The *Première*—Oscar Wilde before the Curtain—Comments on His Attitude—The Obvious Explanation—"A Woman of no Importance"—"An Ideal Husband"—Some Criticisms—A New Departure—"The Importance of being Earnest"—Its Reception—The Critics Disarmed—Its Supernatural Cleverness—What that Portended—Oscar Wilde's Psychopathia—The Causes of its Periodical Outbreak—The Unconsciousness of the Afflicted—A Document from Hall Caine's Collection—The Corruption of London—Facts afterwards Remembered—The New Hedonists—Then and Now—Oscar Wilde in Paris—Two Pen-Pictures of him—Octave Mirbeau and de Régnier.

THE year 1892 was the *annus mirabilis* of our poor hero's life. It was to put within his grasp those things which seemed desirable to him, the things for which he had laboured so long, amidst such disappointments, and with efforts so varied. He was not to know then, nor were his delighted friends to know what success was to bring in its train, nor what would be the dreadful effect of the intoxicating draught of triumph which at last he was able to raise to his lips in the golden beaker of popular fame.

The year began auspiciously for him, for in January the foremost organ of English criticism,

the *Athenæum*, which had steadily censured his work in the past, reviewed in a flattering and advantageous manner another collection of short stories: "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories," which had been published in the previous July by Messrs Osgood, M'Ilvaine & Co. These stories were meant to teach nothing; they were *amusettes* merely, intended to interest and amuse, "pot-boilers" as the argot of the craft calls them. When Oscar Wilde wrote *àpropos* of the reviews of "Dorian Gray" that he had no wish to become a popular novelist because that was far too easy he was indulging in no vainglorious boast. *Ne faict ce tour qui veult*, could not be said to him. It was a positive fact that had he chosen to write marketable stuff there was nobody in London who could have produced a more saleable and more popular "line" of fictional reading-matter. He could invent *amusette* stories by the hundreds. Many of his friends have heard him to do it. When he was living in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, his brother Willy, who used to write stories for the papers and the magazines, often came to him in the mornings, while Oscar was still in bed, and would say: "Oscar, I want the plot of a story or two. Yates is asking me for some." Then Oscar, still puffing his cigarette, would

begin to invent stories. One morning, a friend of his recalls, he thus invented the plots of six short stories for his brother in less than half-an-hour. The stories were afterwards written, and proved very popular. He furnished many other men with the ideas which Nature had refused to them. He equipped many writers with their entire stock-in-trade. The mere eavesdropper at his door showed that he could found a literary reputation and a fortune on such fragments of Oscar Wilde's conversation, as, straining his ears, he was able to overhear. In "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," he gives a specimen of this kind of work. It is not an exaggeration to say that had he chosen he could have produced a volume of, at least, equal merit every month of his life. But he despised work of that kind. "It was far too easy." Still the elements of popularity and of financial reward were there. Here, for instance, is the opinion of the *Athenæum* referred to above. Now the *Athenæum's* opinions have an undoubted effect on the trade, and it is in the hands of the retail bookseller that the fame and fortune of literary craftsmen rest in our commercial England.

"Mr Oscar Wilde's little book of stories," so runs this review, which appeared in the number for 23rd January 1892, "is capital. They are

delightfully humorous, witty, and fresh, sparkling with good things, full of vivacity and well put together."

"'The Canterville Ghost' is a first-rate ghost story, told partly from the point of view of the ghost himself—a most refreshing novelty—and partly from that of the American family who have bought the ancestral home of the Cantervilles. 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' is a very good story, too, told in a vein of drollery which is quite distinctive. These two pieces will bear reading aloud—a decidedly severe test."

As late as last year there was on sale in one of the second-hand book-shops in London a copy of this book, which was inscribed :—

"Constance from Oscar, July, '91."

It was the copy which he had presented to his wife. In this volume the following passages were marked in pencil, no doubt by the author himself, wishing to call attention to certain parts of the book which Sterne, had he been the writer, would probably have printed on purple patches. It will give a taste of the quality of this book if we reproduce three passages so marked.

"Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merry, laugh or shed tears. But in real life it is so different.

Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlet has to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast."

"And yet it was not the mystery, but the comedy of suffering that struck him; its absolute uselessness, its grotesque want of meaning. How incoherent everything seemed! How lacking in all harmony! He was amazed at the discord between the shallow optimism of the day and the real facts of existence. He was still very young."

It was perhaps not, after all, to draw the attention of his wife to the purple patches in his book that Oscar Wilde made those pencil-marks in this volume. It was, perhaps, in one of those lucid moments of foreboding which come to certain men. He may have foreseen the part that was to be forced upon him to play; have felt in advance the absolute uselessness of the suffering which he was to undergo; and have detected behind the shallow optimism of the day what were the real facts of existence. In the concluding words of the third passage we also detect a strange application to his own case as the future was to reveal it.

"The great piles of vegetables looked like

masses of jade against the morning sky, like masses of green jade against the pink petals of some marvellous rose. Lord Arthur felt curiously affected, but could not tell why. There was something in the dawn's loveliness that seemed to him inexpressibly pathetic, and he thought of all the days that break in beauty and that set in storm."

The time was, however, now at hand when his apparent optimism and that mask of strong confidence in himself which gave such umbrage to his rivals were to receive at the hands of the British public their fullest warranty. It was on the night of 20th February that there was produced at the St James's theatre the new and original play in four acts, "Lady Windermere's Fan," by Oscar Wilde. The performance announced itself as a success even before the curtain had risen on the first act. The house was full, the audience was a friendly one. Still, London Society was yet unconquered. The audience, if friendly, was not a brilliant one. It was *la grande Bohème* that came to judge of Oscar Wilde as a dramatist." "Never," says a contemporary writer, "did audience at a *première* appear less brilliantly attired. The duchesses, countesses, and other *grandes dames* whose foibles and follies were to be held up over the

footlights were absent. Amongst the ladies present whose toilettes were noticed were Mrs Bram Stoker 'in a wonderful evening wrap of striped brocade,' Mrs Jopling-Rowe 'becomingly arrayed in shrimp-pink, lightly accented with black,' Mrs Pinero, Miss Julia Neilson, and Miss Florence Terry. Mrs Oscar Wilde was there, and we read that 'she looked charming in her pale-blue brocaded gown made after the fashion of Charles I.'s time, with its long tabbed bodice, slashed sleeves, and garniture of old lace and pearls.' Amongst other distinguished people in the audience were, Mrs Langtry, Mrs Campbell-Praed, Mr Bancroft, Mrs Hare, Mr Charles Matthews, Mr Inderwick, Dr Playfair, Mr Luke Fildes, Mr Forbes-Robertson, and Mr Oswald Crawford."

The success of the play was never in doubt, and here again Oscar Wilde's peculiar genius triumphed. He established the falsity of that axiom, "The play is the thing," which the greatest of dramatists laid for the guidance of future playwrights. His play was *not* the thing, to which he had paid attention, on which he had laboured. His story was of the kind which has always tempted tyro dramatists. It was only another version of "The Wife's Secret." For the first night or two of "Lady Windermere's

Fan," the secret of Mrs Erlynne's identity was kept from the audience until the *dénouement*, which was, of course, the greatest mistake that the playwright could have committed. Mrs Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother, a *declassée* who is supposed to be dead, but whom Lord Windermere befriends for her daughter's sake. From this proceeds the entanglement. In a caricature of Oscar Wilde which appeared in the following number of *Punch* he was represented as leaning on a pedestal with his elbow propped upon volumes of "Odette," "Francillon," and "Le Supplice d'Une Femme," to make room for which a bust of Shakespeare has been dethroned. At his feet is a volume of Sheridan's comedies. The suggestion was, of course, that he had drawn his inspiration from these various works. Many other plays in which the *donnée* is almost identical with that of "Lady Windermere's Fan" might have been cited. The question was not there. It was by his way of treating a time-old subject that he scored his great success. His dialogue was wonderful because it was he himself talking all the time. As he never failed to charm and delight, almost to the point of mental intoxication, those who were privileged to listen to him, there was no reason that his success should have been

any smaller here. For the rest, the play was beautifully produced. The dresses and decorations were magnificent, and the acting far from being—as Oscar Wilde once put it—" a source of danger in the perfect representation of a work of art," made a play of what risked at one time to be classed only as a spoken extravaganza.

At the end of the performance in answer to the enthusiastic calls of the audience Oscar Wilde came in front of the curtain. He was carrying a half-smoked cigarette in his hand. He made a curious speech, in which he said that he was pleased that they had enjoyed themselves, which was what he could say of himself. The carrying of a cigarette, and the tone of the speech were most adversely commented upon by the critics. Clement Scott in Monday's *Daily Telegraph* was severe on the breach of manners committed, " when undeterred by manager, unchecked by the public voice, unreprimanded by men, and tacitly encouraged by women, an author lounges in front of the footlights without any becoming deference of attitude, takes no trouble to fling aside his half-smoked cigarette, and proceeds to compliment the audience on its good sense in liking what he himself has condescended to admire." In *Truth* the chastisement administered was much more severe.

These are some extracts from the article which appeared in that journal :—

" It is strange that the legitimate Irish successor to Joe Miller should have forgotten one of the stalest stories of his native Dublin. There was once on a time a row in a Dublin gallery. ' Throw him over ! Turn him out,' were the cries vociferously yelled by the gods. But during the lull there came a reproving voice : ' Be aisy bhoys ! Don't waste him. Spile a fiddler with him ! ' They were dangerously near spoiling a fiddler with Oscar Wilde last Saturday night. No one was quite prepared for his last move in calm effrontery, deliberately planned and gratuitously offensive. It took the whole audience aback. But when the meaning of the whole thing dawned upon those present, when it was discovered that the so-called dramatist was calmly puffing himself between the whiffs of a cigarette in a public playhouse I could see the fists and toes of countless men nervously twitching. They wanted to get at him. Luckily for Oscar the well-known pittites and gallery boys do not patronise the St James's Theatre, else that famous speech would never have been finished without serious damage to Mr Alexander's property."

In *Punch* of the following week the incident

was the subject of an article illustrated with the caricature referred to above, and entitled "A Wilde 'Tag' to a Tame Play," where Oscar Wilde's *gaucherie* was humorously and not too unkindly satirised.

For that his conduct was nothing but a *gaucherie* it needs not charity to believe. It is obvious. The man was under the shock of a great joy. He had temporarily lost his head. He did not know what he was doing. We have all read of the strange antics which dramatic authors have performed under similar emotion. Daudet, for instance, used to go rushing along the streets of Paris like a madman. In Oscar's case emotion would be all the more overwhelming that the verdict of the audience that night meant for him rescue from all the forlorn makeshifts and hazardous expedients of his career, release from poverty, popular affirmation of a talent which his detractors had persistently denied, all those things in fact, which artists may disdain but for lack of which they perish. He was a bulky, full-blooded man; the blood rushed to his head, and he was unconscious of what he was doing. As to the cigarette, well, it was half-smoked. It had not been lighted for the purpose of the entry. He was such a habitual smoker that probably he did not even know that

he had a cigarette in his hand. Such smokers notice nothing except when they are not smoking. As to his remarks, it was the *bafouillæge* of a man who was not master of himself. Possibly he remembered vaguely in his confusion that the Latin dramatists used to put into the mouths of the actor who spoke last a message to the audience to applaud. Poor Oscar's classical training played him unconsciously a nasty trick. His "Vos Plaudite" was taken as an offence. The thing is so obvious. Is it probable that a man who had been struggling for years for success, popularity and money from his profession would deliberately insult his audience and ruin the prospects which had shown themselves so rosy? The man was not a fool, and it seems as unlikely—unless we are to consider him suffering that night from one of the attacks of his epileptiform malady—that he would have acted as he did from a deliberate and calculated wish to treat his patrons with insolent arrogance, as that he purposely made a corrupt and immoral book of his novel.

For the rest, the London public took no notice of the incident. The author's private manners did not concern it at all. There was a good play to be seen at the St James's Theatre, and London went to see it. The opinion, then expressed,

has been ratified since. The play has frequently been revived, and each time with increased success. It is playing this year in America before enthusiastic houses. On the Continent, with the exception, perhaps, of Italy, this play meets with little approval. For the French it is *choses vues;* the Germans speak of it as a *Gartenmauer* comedy, which means something that appeals only to the public in a certain environment.

As he drove home radiant that night Oscar Wilde could say to himself: "I am the author of 'Lady Windermere's Fan.'" No doubt that he did say it. May it be hoped that no foreboding came to trouble his tranquil joy, no foreboding of the times so close at hand when he might be called by no other name than that.

Three years of prosperity and triumph were to be accorded to him. The period of want was over; he was acknowledged one of the first playwrights on the English stage; his income sprang from nothing to several thousands a year. During this period of three years he produced successfully three other plays. On 19th April 1893 was performed his "A Woman of No Importance." On this occasion he was blamed for *not* responding to the cry of the audience for a speech. This time, however, he

had kept his head, for such emotions as had moved him on the night of his first success come to a man once only in life. "A Woman of No Importance" frequently played since, formerly as by the author of "Lady Windermere's Fan," and now under the author's real name, has continued to please and amuse the English-speaking audiences of two worlds.

In 1895 he produced two plays of a very different character. The one, "An Ideal Husband," was first brought out on 3rd January. *The Times* critic wrote of this performance :—

"'An Ideal Husband' was brought out last night with a similar degree of success to that which has attended Mr Wilde's previous productions. It is a similar degree of success due to similar causes. For 'An Ideal Husband' is marked by the same characteristics as 'Lady Windermere's Fan' and 'A Woman of No Importance.' There is a group of well-dressed men and women on the stage talking a strained inverted but rather amusing idiom, while the action, the dramatic motive springs from a conventional device of the commonest order of melodrama."

The *Athenæum*'s criticism may also be quoted in part. It endeavours to explain Oscar Wilde's

dramaturgical process, and to account for his undeniable success.

"One of the constituent elements of wit is the perception of analogies in things apparently disparate and incongruous. Accepting this as a canon, and testing it by the pretensions of Oscar Wilde in his latest play, the writer might be pronounced the greatest of wits, inasmuch as he perceives analogies in things absolutely antagonistic. His presumable end is gained, since a chorus of laughter attends his propositions or paradoxes. It requires, however, gifts of a kind not usually accorded to humanity to think out a statement such as 'High intellectual pleasures make girls' noses large!' 'Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast. . .' 'All reasons are absurd,' and the like."

An intimate friend of Oscar Wilde's remembers talking of this criticism with the playwright. "It is not very difficult, Oscar," he said, "to see what suggested to you the statements which the critic finds so weird. When you wrote that about girls' noses you had probably in mind the connection between the pains of thought and that French expression which describes the lengthening of the nose as an outward physical sign of mental perplexity or *chagrin, faire un nez*. As to the remark about dull people being

brilliant at breakfast you obviously meant that nervous, high-strung people, people of pleasure, of thought, of midnight labours are, in fact, at their worst at breakfast time, when by contrast with them the eupeptic, healthy, people not of nervous temperaments appear at their best." "You are quite right," said Oscar, "but you overlook the third statement complained of. All reasons are absurd!"

Till then Oscar Wilde's success as a playwright had been great; yet he had not so far shown even a small part of the splendid service which it was in his power to render to the gaiety of our nation. In the early part of January he devoted a fortnight to the writing of a comedy of the farcical order to which he gave the name of "The Importance of Being Earnest": this was produced for the first time on 14th February at the St James's Theatre. The author described this piece himself as a "trivial comedy for serious people." He is reported also to have said of it that "the first act is ingenious, the second beautiful, the third abominably clever." As a matter of fact, the whole is abominably clever, while, perhaps, also both ingenuity and beauty are lacking. The plot certainly displays none of the former quality and beauty, except in the abstract sense which applies to any work of art

which is close to perfection of its kind, has, of course, nothing to do, in that *galère*. Clever it is beyond praise, because here once again we have Oscar Wilde joking as only Oscar Wilde could joke. It is an extravaganza spoken by Oscar through the mouths of a number of men and women.

"Almost every sentence of the dialogue," said *The Times* critic next morning, "bristles with epigram of the now accepted pattern, the manufacture of this being apparently conducted by its patentee with the same facility as 'the butterwoman's rank to market.'"

"Yet frivolous, saucy, and impertinent as Mr Wilde's dialogue is," wrote the *Athenæum* critic, "and uncharacteristic also, since every personage in the drama says the same thing, it is, in a way, diverting. The audience laughs consumedly, and the critic, even though he should chafe, which is surely superfluous, laughs also in spite of himself. There is, moreover, a grave serenity of acquiescence in the most monstrous propositions that is actually and highly humorous."

The writer of "At The Play" in the March number of *The Theatre* found the "new trivial comedy 'a bid for popularity in the direction of farce.' Stripped of its 'Oscarisms'—regarded

purely as a dramatic exercise—it is not even a good specimen of its class."

The critic in *Truth* fairly surrendered at last.

" I have not the slightest intention of seriously criticising Mr O. Wilde's piece at the St James's," he writes under the heading of " The Importance of Being Oscar," " as well might one sit down after dinner and attempt gravely to discuss the true inwardness of a *soufflé*. Nor, unfortunately, is it necessary to enter into details as to its wildly farcical plot. As well might one, after a successful display of fireworks in the back garden, set to work laboriously to analyse the composition of a Catherine Wheel. At the same time I wish to admit, fairly and frankly, that ' The Importance of Being Earnest ' amused me very much."

The public never had a moment's hesitation about the play. Each audience laughed as never has audience laughed before in a theatre where the work of an English writer of comedy has been performed. Oscar Wilde had transplanted to London the exuberant gaiety of Paris, without appealing by even the faintest suggestion to that *fumier* of which Heine spoke as being the soil on which all French comedy and farce thrive. The play is a clean play, a play of the " knock-about " farcical order, with this tremendous distinction that the knock-about here is not a

physical conflict, but a perpetual tussle of wit and repartee. It was aptly described as a "fantastic farce." We had here the true Oscar, or rather one of the true Oscars, full of rollicking, boyish, extravagant humour, turning to mirth all things. . . . Many people who had all along been hostile to him as a man and as a writer, who "had seen nothing in his works," and had professed to be bored by his more serious comedies, became Wilde's men heart and soul after having witnessed this play. A great Irish writer remarked recently that after he had seen "The Importance of Being Earnest" in Dublin, he began to look forward with impatience to the day when Oscar Wilde's ashes should be brought from Bagneux cemetery back to his native land, and a statue to the great dramatist should be raised on the banks of the Anna Liffey. And these were the words of a cynical man of the world, ever chary of praise.

After that night at the St James's Theatre London felt itself, indeed, the imperial city which is under tribute to no other nation for its enjoyments as for its wants. One may fancy what would have been the feeling of the Romans if one day a dramatist had risen up amongst them who rendered their arena free of Greece. Our pride was flattered; we could hurl back the re-

proach of national dulness; we foresaw with pleasurable and gratified anticipation the return to the English stage of the laurel-wreath that centuries ago had been wrested from us by the foreigner. We felt that we could close our front-door and put out a notice to the Ibsens, the Scribes, the Sardous, the Mosers, the Brissons, the Capuses, and the rest that we thanked them kindly for their calls, but that we needed nothing that day or on any subsequent day.

Alas! not one of those who witnessed that wonderful *première* at the St James's Theatre—unless, indeed, somewhere in the stalls or boxes there may have been seated in observation some acute pathologist—did realise that the very brilliancy which so delighted him was but a symptom of a cruel mental disease. The cleverness displayed appeared to the dazzled audience supernatural. It was so indeed. As one may see in the circus-ring clowns and acrobats who perform prodigious feats because before they come into the arena they have stimulated to the uttermost their nerves and muscles, and for a short time, indeed, do appear to be capable of deeds of skill and daring which no ordinary man might with impunity attempt; as one sees in the Indian bazaar the feeble fakir, frenzied with drugs, running a tigerish course of devastation

and murder : so here too an agency was at work which had forced the genius of the man who so impressed us with its splendour over the narrow border-line of which Dryden speaks.

From circumstances which so soon afterwards became matters of public knowledge and dismay there can be no doubt that it was a diseased brain which had fashioned for delight and laughter these splendid and exuberant imaginings.

It will be remembered that in the early part of 1892 Oscar Wilde suddenly passed from a precarious and troubled existence, from which sheer penury was not always absent, to a height of prosperity and prospects of great wealth and power. Even the strongest heads have been known to turn under such a shock. In Oscar Wilde's case we have a man, who by predisposition and atavism on both sides of his family was one least prepared to withstand a shock so powerful. Physical causes contributed to inflame what may be described as the psychical traumatism caused by this blow. He was ever a man fond of the pleasures of the table, of wines and spirits, and the use of the narcotic, tobacco. Till that point in his career absence of means had put a certain check upon extravagant indulgence. After his accession to prosperity this check was removed, and for many

months, indeed, for the period of three years, he was overstimulating his body and poisoning his nerve-centres to an extent which is revealed to us by the complete state of neurasthenia into which he fell shortly before his death. A very distinguished lady who has made a life-study of the question of nutrition on the mental state of man recently expressed in a letter her conviction that it was to his irregular mode of life that much of Oscar Wilde's downfall could be attributed, both before and after his confinement in a gaol.

"My belief is," she wrote to the author of "The Story of an Unhappy Friendship"—"and you seem to suggest something of the same kind—that the prison fare restored his health and his brain, and that had he had some really true friend who could have kept all alcohol and all meat and high living from him he would have returned to his poor wife, and all would have been different. I am so entirely convinced this is the case in hundreds of cases. The return to old drinks and the old foods reproduces the old self-same mental aberration which continually makes prisoners return to exactly the same state they were in before they went to prison, and to commit the same crimes."

The temperance lecturers, if they had the

courage to quote the example, could find in the cases of those two brilliant men, William and Oscar Wilde, most striking demonstrations of the truth of their teachings, and the importance of their warnings. The man who drinks may not injure himself, he may die in good repute and lie buried under eulogistic marble, but he transmits to his aftercomers in their life-blood the very germs of dissolution, crime, and death. Oscar paid in his innocent person the toll that Nature exacted for the centuries of Hibernian conviviality of rollicking ancestors. He was never once intoxicated in his life ; except in the very last mournful weeks of his life, when he sought in alcohol a stimulus to his flagging brain, he held excess in abhorrence ; yet by reason of his descendance his indulgences, such as they were, in strong drink and gourmandising on stimulating foods, which would have been harmless to a man not predisposed by heredity, incontestably produced the terrible mischief which was the cause of his ruin, disgrace and death. We have in his life the clearest demonstration of this fact. One has but to compare his mental, moral, and physical condition while he was leading a life of excess, with the man whom we see in his cell in Reading Gaol, writing "De Profundis." Max Nordau was in the right when he spoke of

Oscar Wilde as a degenerate, and his essay would have had more effect had it been worded with more charity and less rancour. There was in the composition of that wonderful brain, hidden somewhere, a demon factor, which the *coup de fouet* of alcohol and excess of stimulating food could lash into periodical activity. The evidence is very strong that Oscar Wilde's special form of disease was epileptiform, as indeed are all the most cruel afflictions of the brain. One striking characteristic of these formidable maladies is that their victim, who, while under the influence of the paroxysm he commits the most atrocious deeds, is, when he recovers his sanity, totally unconscious of what he has done. When Hall Caine some years ago was preparing for a book on drunkenness he was supplied by the great American temperance lecturer, Gough, with an illustration of the fatal dangers of drink to certain natures. "A man," related Gough, "woke up one morning in the lock-up in New York. Horribly ashamed to find himself, a worthy, respectable citizen, in such a place, he called to the warder and asked him what could have caused his arrest. 'I suppose I got drunk last night?' he said. 'You did so,' said the warder. 'My poor wife!' cried the man bitterly ashamed, 'what will she say when she hears that?' He

then asked how soon it would be before he was taken before the magistrate to pay his fine and to return home. 'You won't go up to-day,' said the warder. 'You are in for murder. You killed someone last night!' The horrified prisoner refused to believe it. When at last the dreadful truth dawned upon him that the warder was speaking seriously, and that, indeed, his hands were stained in blood, he thought first of all of the misery and consternation which this would produce at home. 'My poor wife! My poor wife!' he cried. 'Why, man!' cried the warder, almost indignantly, for he supposed the man to be feigning ignorance, 'sure and it's your wife that ye've murdered.' This was without a doubt a man suffering, though he did not know it, from an epileptiform affliction. He was a man who if he had never got drunk might have lived a blameless and honoured life. The alcohol had whipped the sleeping fiend into activity. There are thousands of men walking about London at this moment who are in his case. One reads every day in the law reports, in the sordid and mournful records of the police-courts and the Old Bailey, of cases which exactly tally with this one. That Oscar Wilde's psychopathia was the same, every piece of evidence that we have before us goes to confirm. Alcohol

was sheer poison to him. All the extraordinary acts which he committed, the acts of sheer insanity, were committed, not when he was drunk, for he never was drunk, but when alcohol had developed an epileptic crisis in his head. It is such a pity that people, because they are still so entirely under the stupid domination of the Church, will not approach the consideration of these matters in a purely scientific spirit. After each crisis Oscar Wilde seems to have been totally unconscious of having done anything bad, detestable, shameful, or even unusual. Under no other condition could he have maintained the serene and tranquil dignity which stamped him in his sane moments. Many of his friends refused to believe one word of the charges brought against him when the terrible revelations of the Old Bailey were made. Many even to-day refuse to believe them. It must be remembered, also, that until the very day of his arrest his wife had not the faintest suspicion of anything wrong in his conduct. Such consummate dissimulation, where it is not hypocrisy—and Oscar Wilde was no hypocrite, could not be a hypocrite, was too arrogant to be a hypocrite—is invariably the concomitant of the worst forms of madness.

During the three or four years of his excessive

indulgences in drink and food his conduct appears, from what was heard afterwards, to have caused disquietude to his friends, and disgust to his enemies. After his downfall one heard that during that time his example had made London "impossible." This one man, it was stated, had corrupted the metropolis of the world's greatest empire. He had infected six millions of men and women. These statements, when people came to reflect, did not appear, even to those who had never paused to consider causes, so entirely preposterous. It was remembered that during the period referred to the language of certain market-porters, cornermen, and fishwives in London had been far from select; that during those years the Divorce Courts had never once suspended their sittings, except in times of vacation; that the attendances at many churches and chapels in the metropolis had often been mournfully exiguous; and that it was dangerous for any respectable woman to walk alone and unattended after midnight in the Haymarket or Piccadilly.

It is incontestable also that during that period a number of minor writers of verse, who called themselves new Hedonists or modern decadents, published little books of unpleasing verses, and that one or two publishers did in the issuing of

these verses realise a certain competency. But the readers of these verses were very few, and the nasty, little poets soon crept back into their suburban kennels, to take to easier and more remunerative forms of writing. If one looks to-day for the pornographic pleiad which was oozed forth on to the surface of the London mud in those days, it is not even in the purlieus of Parnassus that such individuals as have survived will be found. They are middle-aged now, the new Hedonists, whiskered and paunchy. The thin veneer of artistry has long since been peeled off their faces, and the rank stigmata of the Philistine now stand forth. There is a horrible passage in one of Lombroso's books in which, writing of criminal women, he says that in youth it is very difficult, almost impossible, for the physiologist to detect the sure signs of their criminality. The freshness of their complexions, the chubbiness of their faces hide the stigmata. It is only towards middle-age that these signs, which all along have been there, though concealed by the mask of youth, come forth in all their horrible significance. This passage often occurs to him who to-day considers the men who formed the band of decadents and hedonists, who mimicked Oscar Wilde in his acts of insanity, thinking in that wise to gain some

of the refulgence which shone from the genius of his lucid intervals.

During those years he frequently crossed to Paris. There, at least, and speaking generally, no suspicion assailed him. In the essay by Henri de Régnier, to which reference has been made above, we find a pen portrait of him as he was at that time, and before quoting it it may be as well to put down what was the opinion of this writer on Oscar Wilde, as he summed it up at the end of his essay, which, it should be remembered, was written after all the exposure had taken place.

"In any case," he writes, "we may ignore what was his manner of life in London, and recall only that we met in Paris an amiable and eloquent gentleman of that name whom all will remember who are fond of beautiful language and beautiful stories."

This is the picture which Henri de Régnier paints of Oscar Wilde in the early nineties :—

"Each year, in the spring and sometimes in the winter, one used to meet a perfect English gentleman in Paris. He used to lead in Paris the life which Monsieur Paul Bourget, for instance, might lead in London, frequenting artists, and showing himself in *salons* and fashionable restaurants in the company of the

leaders of mundane society ; seeking in one word all things which can interest a man who knows how to think, and who knows how to live.

" This foreigner was tall and of great corpulence. A high complexion seemed to give still greater width to his clean-shaven and proconsular face. It was the unbearded (*glabre*) face that one sees on coins. The eyes smiled. The hands seemed to be beautiful : they were rather fleshy and plump, and one of them was ornamented with a ring in which a beetle of green stone was set. The man's tall figure allowed of his wearing ample and masterly frock-coats, which opened out on somewhat 'loud' waistcoats of smooth velvet or flowered satins. Oriental cigarettes with gold tips were ever consuming themselves into smoke in his mouth. A rare blossom in his button-hole gave a finishing touch to his rich attire in which every detail seemed to have been carefully studied. From cab to cab, from café to café, from salon to salon, he moved with the lazy gait of a stout man who is rather weary. He carried on his correspondence by means of telegrams, and his conversation by means of apologues. He passed from a luncheon with Monsieur Barrés to a dinner with Monsieur Moréas, for he was curious about all kinds of thoughts and manners of thinking, and the bold,

concise and ingenious ideas of the former interested him as much as the short, sonorous and peremptory affirmations of the latter. Paris welcomed this traveller with a certain amount of curiosity. M. Hugues Le Roux praised him, M. Téodor de Wyzewa scratched him, but nothing disturbed his stolid bearing, his smiling serenity, and his mocking beatitude. Which of us did not meet him during those years? I also had the pleasure of seeing him, and of seeing him again sometimes. His name was Oscar Wilde. He was an English poet and a man of wit."

However, when he was accompanied, as he sometimes was, by the evil genius of his life, he seems in Paris, also, to have displayed eccentricities which did not escape the keen and satirical observation of certain. In Octave Mirbeau's book, "Le Journal d'Une Femme de Chambre," there is a picture of Oscar Wilde, which reveals him as the *poseur* that he seemed to be when his fits were upon him, or when he had at his side to prompt him the corrupting influence which we have indicated. Mirbeau describes a *soirée*, a dinner-party in the *grande Bohème* of Paris, at which are present two English guests, Lucien Sartorys and Sir Harry Kimberly. The characteristics of these two friends are de-

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scribed in the crude realism of expression which is employed throughout the book by Mirbeau. Sir Harry Kimberly is Oscar Wilde. It is apparent that Mirbeau must have met him at some such dinner-party as is depicted here, and that Oscar Wilde was talking nonsense. He records a long story which Oscar Wilde told on that occasion, adding just enough of his own to carry the bathos of it to its lowest point ; he castigates the attitudes of the foolish women who were listening, and quotes their foolish comments. The incident covers many pages of the book. Kimberly concludes his story by saying : " And that is why I have dipped the point of my golden knife in the preserves which the Kanaka virgins had prepared, in honour of a betrothal, such as our century, ignorant of beauty, never saw the like of in splendour and magnificence."

After the dinner, Kimberly goes from group to group asking : " Have you drunk of the milk of the fisher-weasel ? Oh ! Drink the milk of the fisher-weasel. . . . It is so ravishing ! "

We see here the Oscar Wilde as he was at first during that scene which is described by Jean Joseph-Renaud. But, unlike as on that occasion, he was unconscious of the effect that he was producing.

We find also in " The Story of an Unhappy

Friendship" that the author, who was one of Oscar Wilde's oldest friends, visiting him in January of 1895, detected a surprising change in him both physically and mentally. This is the passage referred to :—" It was at Christmas that I met him last, before the catastrophe of 1895, and my impression was altogether a painful one. He was not the friend I had known and admired for so many years. I dined with him at Tite Street : for once there was no pleasure, but distress rather, in the occasion. He looked bloated. His face seemed to have lost its spiritual beauty, and was oozing with material prosperity. And his conversation also was not agreeable. I concluded that too much good living, and too much success had momentarily affected him both morally and physically. There is an American slang-phrase which exactly describes the impression that he produced upon me. He seemed to be suffering from a swollen head."

CHAPTER XV

A Sagacious and Benevolent Autocrat—How he could have saved Oscar Wilde—The Advantages of the Bastille—Restraint at Last—Under what Circumstances—The Unconsciousness Displayed—Oscar Wilde's Graphology—Isabella, Baroness of Ungern-Sternberg—Her Reading of his Character—The Sister of Nietzsche—Wilde's Mental Recovery in Prison—Oscar Wilde released on Bail—Hunted from House to House—Takes Refuge with his Mother—His Position—The Sale at Oakley Street—"Salomé"—His Bearing before the Trial—*Abyssus Abyssum Invocat*—The End—Silence Above, Clamour Below.

WHEN one contemplates the spectacle afforded by this man of genius, endowed with gifts which made for the pride and joy of the nation, and which in this sense were part of the imperial inheritance, it must fill many with regret that we do not live in England under the sway of a sagacious and benevolent autocrat. If, as, from the evidence that is now before us, appears patent, there were times in Oscar Wilde's life when his conduct, his utterances, his demeanour must have revealed to any but the most superficial observer that the man was not entirely responsible at certain periods and under certain influences, what a subject for regret it must

ever be that no authority there was which, able to disregard the democratic clamour of the absolute right of man to complete personal liberty, could have imposed upon him a necessary wholesome and politic restraint. Had Louis XIV. been living as autocrat of England, or even Napoleon, and had there raised itself in the centre of London a beneficent Bastille, what grander use could there ever have been for the discreet *lettre de cachet*, which for a time would have put the man under that salutary restraint, which afterwards, under tragic circumstances, worked in his whole organism a reformation so astonishing and so splendid! But alas, we live under a democratic government, with all the incoherences which must proceed from the association of two ideas—democracy and government—so antagonistic. We profess such respect for the liberty of the individual that we complacently look on at the antics of the partially demented until some act is committed which puts him within the grasp of the law. We then punish him for a crime which is our own, and, accomplices before the fact, we force him to bear the responsibility which is entirely ours. It is painfully illogical, but where the mob is allowed to interfere in matters of government nothing else is to be expected.

In Oscar Wilde's case things happened as they do happen in democratic governments. His intermittent insanity, stimulated by the worst influences, led him to acts which at last enabled the authorities to move; and that restraint was put upon him which applied in another fashion would have preserved to England one of the men most fitted to serve her in the field of intellectual delight. The criminal law interfered at last, and great scandal was thereby caused, which could have been avoided by a Monsieur de Sartine, or other Public Interferer, acting in the general interests of the public and the private interests of the man, if our commonsense allowed of the employment of an official so useful.

Various causes contributed to the gust of horror by which the unhappy man, after these exposures, was swept over into the bottomless abyss. For centuries past the promptings of his insanity have been invested in the public mind, at least as far as England and her English-speaking colonies are concerned, with all the dread that acts of sacrilege inspire. When in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the secular courts took over from the ecclesiastical tribunals the estimate of criminality and the punishment of offenders, there were thus transmitted for all their rigours

three classes of offence, for which the Church had a special designation, not to be heard by ears polite. Of these heresy was one, and usury another. We have lived down the horror that heresy used to inspire, and we no longer—those of us who are of the Established Church—desire to see Non-Conformist Ministers burned at any stake; and as to usury, which term covers banking and other financial operations, we have grown in England to look upon the pursuit of this as one of the most desirable and respectable professions that a man can follow. Yet in the times of Queen Elizabeth the practice of heterodoxy and such financial methods as flourish today were acts of sacrilege, and inspired people with the horror of such. The hatred which suddenly blazed forth against Wilde in the masses of the people proceeded from this instinctive horror of sacrilegious acts. One must go back to the Middle Ages, to the times when the *odium theologicum* burned most fiercely, to find any such outbreak of public indignation against a single man. Contributory causes were the detestation in which society held the writer who had so mercilessly exposed its follies, pretences and vices; the long-harboured rancour of the Calvinists to whom Wilde had given mortal offence by his audacity in teaching that

life was a very good thing, that the world was full of pleasures, and that the man lived most wisely who most enjoyed all the good things that human existence can afford ; the personal enmity of a great number of people, provoked by a variety of motives, none honourable, nor worthy, but all human. Amongst the indifferent the satisfaction at the man's removal was akin to that which the owl of whom Gray writes in his Elegy may have felt when its complaints to the moon had been heard, and the cause of them had been suppressed. There is much of the moping owl in a large section of our stolid Britishry, and people of that category dislike nothing more intensely than the man of radio-activity who bustles into the stagnant area of their gelid dulness, and interferes with their somnolent eupepsia. To be forced to think, to be forced to laugh, to be taught things, in one word to be interfered with. No ! No ! NO ! Away with him ! In the official classes, the judicial and police authorities, the feeling against the man was one of intense exasperation at his folly in provoking an inquiry. An official of the Home Office said at the time : " There are on the books at Scotland Yard upwards of 20,000 persons belonging to the better classes in London alone, who are watched by the police,

but who are not interfered with because they do not themselves provoke investigation."

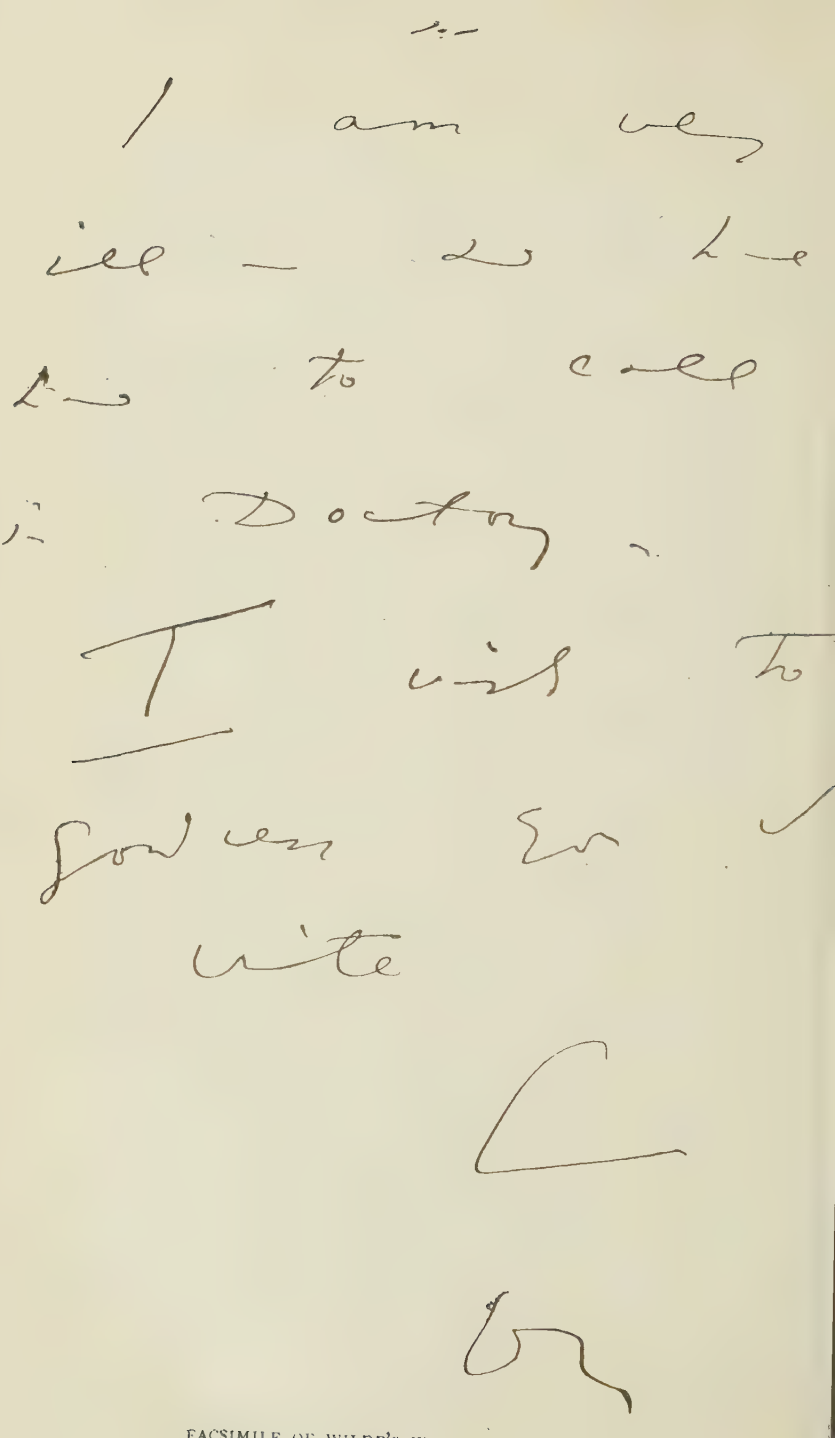
The spectacle of men dealing out what it pleases them to call justice is at no time an inspiriting one. The simian grotesqueness of man never more clearly nor burlesquely manifests itself than in those attitudes which he considers the fullest of dignity, and in those functions in which he feels that he is raising himself above the very low level on which Creation has placed him. It does not come within the province of this book to record otherwise than in the most perfunctory manner these repulsive proceedings. The attitude of the accused man is, however, of psychological interest, and it will be necessary to follow him to some extent through the period where Law and Justice were—to use one of their stock phrases —" dealing with him."

Being one night close upon intoxication, and being urged on by a person, who had a great and pernicious influence with him, Oscar Wilde in March 1895 laid an information for criminal libel against the Marquess of Queensberry. That he was irresponsible at the time when he committed what the National Dictionary of Biography calls an "act of fatal insolence," is very clearly shown by his own appreciation of his

conduct, when a healthy *régime* had once more triumphed over his insanity. In "De Profundis" we find the following passage referring to this act :—"The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was to allow myself to appeal to society for help and protection. To have made such an appeal would have been from the individualist point of view bad enough, but what excuse can there ever be put forward for having made it ? Of course, once I had put into motion the forces of society, society turned on me and said, 'Have you been living all this time in defiance of my laws, and do you now appeal to these laws, for protection ? You shall have those laws exercised to the full. You shall abide by what you have appealed to.' The result is I am in gaol. Certainly no man ever fell so ignobly, and by such ignoble instruments, as I did."

The case against the Marquess of Queensberry commenced at the Old Bailey in the first week of April. Oscar Wilde, the prosecutor, goes down to the court in a brougham with two horses and liveried servants. His psychopathia was at this moment perilously tending towards megalomania and what that portends. His arrogance was superb ; and from its resources he drew the wonderful energy and mental activity

with which he faced the long cross-examination to which he was put by Edward Carson. Though he talked in such a way as to appal the simple citizens who sat in the jury-box, yet his evident superiority in the tourney was so great that by sheer force of his personality and genius he might have carried the day, but for that fatal slip which, occurring at the very end of the encounter, and just as the advocate was about to sit down, brought the whole edifice tumbling about his head. That evening it was communicated to him in a circuitous fashion, but with too apparent explicitness, that his wisest course would be to leave the country. He refused to flee. The next day the prosecution broke down, and a verdict of acquittal was pronounced in favour of the Marquess. Steps were immediately taken to secure the arrest of the prosecutor, but such delays occurred, or were purposely allowed to occur, that the warrant was not executed till late in the evening. Oscar Wilde had spent that afternoon in a private sitting-room at a hotel, smoking cigarettes, drinking whisky and soda, and reading now the Yellow Book, and now the evening papers. He evinced neither dismay nor trepidation when the officers entered the room, and on alighting from the cab at Scotland Yard he had a courteous discussion with



one of the detectives about the payment of the cabman. The unconsciousness displayed would not have deceived a mental pathologist for one moment as to his mental state and consequent irresponsibility.

Arrested on 5th April, and lodged in Holloway on the following day, he spent nineteen days in prison before he was brought to trial at the Old Bailey. During that period he largely recovered his sanity. His physique was still in an abnormal condition, as the writing of some of his letters shows. It is the writing of a neuropath. In the number for March-April 1905 of the *Graphologische Monatshefte*, published in Munich, there appeared a study of Oscar Wilde's character, as revealed by his handwriting, from the pen of a very distinguished Russian lady, the Baroness Isabella von Ungern-Sternberg of Revel. Madame d'Ungern-Sternberg is the Vice-Presidentess of the Paris Graphological Society, and the study is a purely scientific one. It is worthy of the attention of all those who wish to provide themselves with every possible means of arriving at a solution of the formidable problem of Oscar Wilde's mentality. The three pieces of his writing on which she based her study were three letters. Of these, one was written in 1883 to a friend, just after Wilde's

departure from Paris, the second was a letter from Holloway Prison, written while he was under remand, and the third was a note written not long before his death. The Baroness's study of Wilde's writing seems to have inspired her with as great an admiration for his character as her reading of "Intentions" had originally roused her enthusiasm for his talents. A very striking sentence in her estimate of the writing declares:—

"Pathalogisches ist in Wildes Handschrift nicht zu finden, auch nicht in der Probe Fig. 2, sobald wir absehen von der begreiflichen Erregung durch Angst und Hoffnung, Krankheit und Kraenkung."

This means that there was nothing in his writing to reveal a pathological condition; that is to say when he was sane, for he does not appear to have written during the paroxysms of his dementia. The specimen referred to is the letter from Holloway. Here there is nothing pathological, but at the same time the writing shows illness. A curious incident may be related in connection with the Baronne d'Ungern-Sternberg's essay. It so exactly tallied with the opinion which the sister of Nietzsche had formed of Oscar Wilde's character, from her study of his works, and from all that she had heard and read about him, that this distinguished lady

became an immediate convert to the scientific truth of graphology.

He appears to have suffered very greatly during this confinement. "Wilde looked careworn and much thinner" is what the reporters remarked about his appearance in the Old Bailey dock on 26th April. In the letter referred to above he had spoken of himself in the following terms: "I am ill—apathetic. Slowly life creeps out of me."

The trial ended in a disagreement of the jury. Shortly afterwards Oscar Wilde was released on bail to await a fresh trial at the next sessions. The amount was fixed at two thousand five hundred pounds, of which nearly three fourths were provided by a young nobleman, who was but slightly acquainted with the prisoner, and who realised almost the entire fortune at his command to supply the money.

On leaving Holloway Prison Wilde drove to a hotel where rooms had been engaged for him. As he was sitting down to dinner in his private room the manager of the hotel came in, shouted out that he knew who he was, and ordered him to leave the house at once. From thence Wilde drove to another hotel. Here he secured a room, and dinnerless, for he had no appetite left, was about to go to bed, when again he was

driven forth into the streets. Some men, it appeared, had followed him from the gates of Holloway Prison—at whose instigation we need not inquire—and had determined that he should nowhere find shelter that night. They had threatened the manager of the second hotel that if he did not turn Oscar Wilde away they would wreck his house.

He appears to have been refused admission, having been recognised, at other London hostelries that night. In the end he turned his thoughts towards his mother's home. Long past midnight his brother Willy heard a knock at the door of the house in Oakley Street. When he had opened the door, Oscar Wilde, pale as death, dishevelled, unnerved, staggered into the narrow hall, and sinking exhausted on to a chair cried out : " Willy, give me a shelter or I shall die in the streets."

Willy Wilde frequently related the incident afterwards, but with a mixing of metaphors which sufficiently indicates the condition into which he was passing.

" He came," he used to say, " tapping with his beak against the window-pane, and fell down on my threshold like a wounded stag." To the horrors of that period of waiting the touch of the grotesque was not to be wanting.

He was entirely ruined, if such an expression may be applied to a man who had but to sit down and write in order to earn money. He had no money; his home had been sold up; of personal property he had nothing more than the few clothes and trinkets which he brought with him to Oakley Street. For on his arrest the usual had happened. Creditors rushed clamorously to precipitate his downfall. Judgments were "signed," and executions "put in." On the day of the sale the house in Tite Street was invaded by a motley crowd, amongst which the genuine purchasers were few, the prurient sensation-mongers and the shifty-eyed thieves were many. Many articles were stolen; doors were feloniously broken open. Never was such hamesucken perpetrated before with such impunity. Here is the account which an Irish publisher gives of his visit to Tite Street during the sale:—

"I went upstairs and found several people in an empty room, the floor of which was strewn, thickly strewn, with letters addressed to Oscar mostly in their envelopes and with much of Oscar's easily recognisable manuscript. This looked as though the various pieces of furniture which had been carried downstairs to be sold had been emptied of their contents on to the

floor. It is usual at sales, of course, for the furniture to be sold in each room as it stands. After I had been in the room some time, a broker's man came up and said: 'How did you get into this room? What business have you in this room?' I said: 'The door was open and I walked in.' Then the man said: 'Then somebody has broken open the lock, because I locked the door myself.'" It was no doubt from this room that various of Oscar's manuscripts which have never been recovered were stolen. There were the *scenarios* of one or two comedies; a whole poetic drama, "The Woman Covered With Jewels," and the manuscript of a work entitled "The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr W. H. Being the True Secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Now for the First Time here Fully Set Forth." This manuscript had been in the hands of Messrs Elkin Mathews & John Lane, who had already some time previously announced it as being in preparation. On the day of Oscar Wilde's arrest, the manuscript was returned to his house. Nothing has ever been heard of it again. Certainly after Oscar Wilde's arrest there was no more opening for a work which was to establish that it was under the influence of an absorbing adoration for Mr W. H. that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets. It

is the only thing that Oscar ever wrote in which he dallied with the abnormal; and, perhaps, for his reputation amongst the majority it is as well that instead of seeing the light of day this work is resting in the innermost recesses of the Cupboard of Poisons of some rich literary *dilettant*. In *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for July 1889 there appeared an article by Oscar Wilde entitled "The Portrait of Mr W. H.," in which he only very faintly indicates the theory to which he was to give such a development in the longer work. It was to form a piece of documentary evidence in support of his plea of the dignity, beauty, and advantages of those warm friendships between men, which he uttered in the witness-box at the Old Bailey amidst the moved silence even of his enemies.

The sale at Tite Street was not a sale; it was the pillage of an unprotected house. People stole with the greatest effrontery. The prices realised for such articles as did come to the hammer were ridiculously low. "There was a fine Whistler there," said the Irish gentleman referred to above, "the picture of a girl, with the butterfly signature. I wanted to buy it. But the crowd in the room was so dense that one could not move, and I was unable to bid. It was knocked down for six pounds."

From his plays there was nothing to be hoped for. His name, immediately after his arrest, had been effaced both on posters and programmes ; the withdrawal of the plays was only a question of the time it took for the managers to reconcile interest with outraged feelings. For the rest, he had largely mortgaged his interests in these performances. From his books there was nothing to receive. The only asset that he possessed was the play " Salomé," which he had written in French in 1892, and which had been accepted for production by Madame Sarah Bernhardt. Her intention had been to perform it in London, but the Lord Chamberlain's Licenser of Plays refused to allow its performance. It was a Biblical piece ; and in those days Mr George Alexander and Mr Hall Caine had not yet demonstrated the utility of the stage in drawing the public " nearer to the Great White Throne." Oscar Wilde's indignation at this refusal was very great, and he spoke at the time of leaving England and becoming a naturalised Frenchman. If he had followed up his purpose he would have been living now.

While he was in Holloway, having no money for the purposes of his defence, he communicated through a friend with Madame Bernhardt offering to sell her the rights in " Salomé " for a lump

sum. The figure he mentioned was about the sixth part of what that poetic piece has already realised in royalties from Germany alone, without counting the sums which it is now producing as *libretto* in Strauss's opera. Madame Bernhardt missed an excellent investment on this occasion, which as her conduct in this matter was entirely guided by business considerations may be for her to-day the subject of some regret. It is not to over-estimate the productiveness of "Salomé" to say that anyone who had purchased it in 1895 for two or three thousand pounds would have invested his money at a thousand per cent. But, of course, Madame Bernhardt could not foresee that. She shed tears over Oscar Wilde's painful position, she sent him messages of sympathy, and she refused to assist him financially in any way. But for the generosity of Sir Edward Clarke in undertaking to defend him at the Old Bailey without a fee, it seems certain that Oscar Wilde would have been abandoned to the usual resources of poor prisoners. He had come to that: he was a poor prisoner: he might have been the beneficiary of an eleemosynary Old Bailey "soup." Sir Edward Clarke's sympathy with artists is notoriously not a great one; he was the only man in London who refused to sign the petition

that the great Sir Henry Irving should be buried in Westminster Abbey; and this in spite of the fact that they had been schoolfellows together. His principles and convictions must have been outraged by the principles and theories of Oscar Wilde (who, of course, had no convictions) yet he very generously undertook to defend him without remuneration.

His friends had, of course, abandoned him. The usual had taken place. It is foolish to expect exceptional conduct from the average. There had been the usual denials. The Atlantic cable was used by one person in his eager haste to repudiate the fallen man and his many obligations to him. The actors took their revenge for that stinging remark about "the source of danger." Every door was shut upon the unhappy man. This was, perhaps, what afflicted him most. In his terrible awakening what surprised and distressed him beyond anything else was that "people to whom he had been kind, and nothing but kind, should turn upon him." There were, equally, of course, a few *courtisans de la dernière heure*. A man of such charm, such generosity and goodness could not but have friends who preferred him in disgrace and shame and peril to the people who turned their backs upon him. There were a few who would gladly

have gone to prison in his stead, would gladly have died for him. This is no hyperbole. More than one man since his downfall and ruin did die by his own hand, because he could not survive Oscar Wilde's catastrophe. More than a score of men are dragging out a broken life, who had not the courage to put an end to sufferings to which time can bring no surcease. It will not be necessary to say that the "R." of "De Profundis," to whom Oscar Wilde pays a beautiful tribute in that book, a tribute worthy of the man's beautiful conduct, was loyal then as ever. And there were two or three others.

During the period that he spent in Oakley Street, while on bail, Oscar Wilde seemed to have entirely recovered his sanity of mind. His physical condition was however deplorable. His nerves were wrecked. He was in fever all the time. He was paying his debt to Nature for years of indulgence. He was consumed with burning thirst. One of his friends was running out all day to fetch soda-water and lemonade for him. He drank gallons of liquid in the twenty-four hours. His moral attitude was splendid. He had made up his mind to face the worst. The advisability of flight was urged upon him by one of his friends. He refused to listen to the suggestion. It appears that Lady

Wilde had said that if he left the country she would never speak to him again ; but it is certain that the son of Speranza had never seriously entertained the project of showing his heels to a Sassenach judge and gaoler. His brother Willy was almost melodramatic in his protestations that a Wilde would not flee. " He is an Irish gentleman, and he will face the music," was what he used to repeat with almost tedious insistence. One day he announced that he had decided to sell his library in order to find the funds for sending back to France the particular friend who was the advocate of a discreet evanishment, for he entertained the idea that the reason why that friend did not return home was that he had not the means to do so. By a curious coincidence one of the very few books which constituted the " library " was a copy of the essays of that Montaigne, whose remark, " Were I to be accused of stealing the towers of Notre Dame the first thing I should do would be to put the frontier between myself and the *gens de la justice*," was being quoted in support of his advice by the friend whose removal he desired. It is very certain that Willy Wilde felt strongly that the honour of the family would be compromised by Oscar's flight. A young Irish poet relates that visiting Oakley Street

In Memoriam

JANE FRANCESCA AGNES SPERANZA,

LADY WILDE,

Widow of Sir William Wilde, M.D.,

SURGEON OCULIST TO THE QUEEN IN IRELAND. KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF THE NORTH STAR IN SWEDEN.

Died at her residence, 146, Oakley Street, Chelsea, London, Feb. 3rd, 1896.

during that period "Willy came theatrically into the room and said: 'Who are you? What do you want?' I told him who I was," he says, "and added that I had a note for Oscar Wilde. Willy then asked, 'Are you urging him to flee? Because if you are, I won't let him have the note.'"

"I think," the Irish poet has said since, "that the whole family—Irish pride being aroused—felt that the cowardice of running away would be a far greater disgrace than the disgrace of a conviction and imprisonment. For the rest," he adds, "prison does not seem such a disgrace in Ireland, and that for historical associations."

Oscar Wilde's bearing on the night before the last day of his second trial, in the supreme moments of his liberty, filled all those who saw him with respect and admiration. His serenity had returned to him. His sweet, gentle dignity had clothed him anew. The tragic horror of the moment had aroused in him the perfect manliness that periods had lulled into apathetic quiescence. He took farewell of his friends; he informed each one of a little gift, from the poor trinkets which remained to him, which he had destined as a souvenir in case he did not return home on the morrow. It is very certain

that at that moment he felt that if a conviction ensued he would never see any of his friends again; that he felt that he was being tried for his life, and that prison would speedily kill him. He retired early from the mournful gathering, saluting by kissing her hand with stately courtliness, his brother's wife, whose kindness and sympathy had deeply touched his heart. He spent, before he sought his sleepless couch, a long hour with the mother, deeply loved and deeply honoured, whom he was never to see again.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, Saturday, 25th May 1895, Oscar Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to two years hard labour. There had been six counts against him. He was asked after his release by a very old friend as to the justice of the finding, and he said: "Five of the counts referred to matters with which I had absolutely nothing to do. There was some foundation for one of the counts." "But then why," asked his friend, "did you not instruct your defenders?" "That would have meant betraying a friend," said Oscar. Circumstances which have since transpired have established—what for the rest was never in doubt in the minds of those who heard it made—the absolute truth of this statement.

When the verdict became known outside the

court, a foul rabble, believing that an aristocrat had been condemned, filled the Old Bailey with shouts of delight. Men and women joined hands, and a clumsy saraband was danced. Cruelty, the *lascivia di sangue*, glutted itself. There was a peculiar irony in this blood-lust which everywhere in England found expression, for, as the pathologists affirm, it is a morbid manifestation very directly akin to the aberration to which the prisoner had fallen a victim. From evil, evil is bred. *Abyssus abyssum invocat.*

The question presented itself to many: Where was our national regard for Jesus Christ as we exulted in the downfall and misery of the man whom we had punished? The clergy held their tongues. The Church had nothing to say. The doctors, the men of science, the pathologists, the students and masters of psychology, who could have shown that the man was irresponsible: they were all mute. On the heights there was neither sound nor motion: in the depths males and females shouted and danced for gladness.

What ripples of mocking laughter must run through Olympus if ever the careless gods from their lofty seats do deign to look down upon the world and see what men we are and what are the things we do.

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CHAPTER XVI

Oscar Wilde in Prison—The Effect of the Simple Life—A Splendid Renovation—"De Profundis"—The Sincerity of the Book—How Religion came to Wilde—The Scientific Explanation of the Phenomenon—A Quotation from "The Tree of Life"—Oscar Wilde Visited by his Wife—Constance Wilde—Why the Reconciliation never took Effect—Oscar Wilde as a Husband and a Father—The Testimony of Ernest La Jeunesse—A Prison Conversation—Oscar Wilde's Views on Religion—The Impression he produced in Prison—Described as a Saint.

In Wandsworth Prison first and then in Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde's mental development reached a point of transcendency to which never in the world of men he could have hoped to attain. There had been forced upon him the recluse life which has raised many men in the world's history towards the stars, but which, perhaps, never before demonstrated its reforming and enhancing powers in a manner more magnificent, more orbicular, more triumphant. In the old days he had tried to imitate Balzac in his mode of life; but Society and Pleasure had ever knocked at the door of his cell, nor had he had the strength of will great enough to resist their allurements. Now there were iron bars between

him and the wasteful pleasures of the world; a claustration, as strict if less severe than that which Balzac imposed upon himself, held him fast, and he had the time to think. He had the time to think, and with a brain which at last had recovered its splendid normal power. The prison *régime*, the enforced temperance in food, the enforced abstinence from all narcotic drugs and drink, the regular hours, the periodical exercise: the simple life, in one word, had restored to him the splendid heritage that he had received from Nature. What the real Oscar Wilde was, and of what he was capable were now to be made patent. In "De Profundis" he laid his soul bare, and the impartial are to judge from that book of the man's new powers, as a thinker and as a literary artist. His friends will ask no more than that, reserving to themselves the high delight of taking a holy joy in the lofty virtues which that book reveals, the kindness, the patience, the resignation, the forgiveness of sins, so splendid that one may almost believe that in his ardent meditations on Christ, he was able to bring the Bodily Presence of the God who taught these things into his cell, and to learn from the divine lips themselves what is the true secret of human happiness. In the ensuing chapter we have from the pen of a man who saw

him day by day in prison a description of him which shows that he put into hourly practice the lessons he had learned. Critics abroad have said that "there is too much about Christ" in "De Profundis," overlooking the fact that the book is from first page to last inspired by Christ, that no man who had not found Christ could have written that book, nor lived as the man who wrote it did live. In England one heard it said that it is absurd to believe that an agnostic, a sensualist would turn to religion, and the blasphemous statement has been made that this book is in its way no more sincere than the dying confessions of many prison-cells, the greasy cant that officious chaplains win from fawning prisoners! One has heard the word HYPOCRISY pronounced! It is a thousand pities that people are placed by common consent in places of authority and allowed to pronounce opinions, who from a total absence of scientific training, are utterly imcompetent to opine and unworthy to pronounce. It is an elementary fact that when the mind of man either by his own volition or by the force of exterior circumstances is concentrated on the bare facts of existence it becomes religious.

"It is also noteworthy," writes Mr Ernest Crawley, in his remarkable and most interesting

study of religion, " The Tree of Life," " that, while the over-cultured man and the abstract thinker so often discard religion, simpler and actually more complete souls cleave to it with an instinctive faith. But every man, when he happens to be brought face to face with the eternal realities of existence. . . . becomes, *ipso facto*, a religious subject."

In " De Profundis " Oscar Wilde describes the road by which he came from hyper-culture and abstract thought to a simplicity and completeness of soul.

In the same book may be found many of the awful details of his prison life. None of the humiliation, none of the sufferings ordained by our prison regulations were spared to him : he, himself, would have been the last to wish that any exception should be made in his favour. The first three months of his confinement in Wandsworth Gaol were months of atrocious anguish. He relates that the idea of suicide was at all times with him ; the want of means wherewith to effect his purpose alone saved his life. At the end of this period he was seen by a friend, who found him " greatly depressed," prone to tears. His hands were disfigured, the nails were broken and bleeding, the face was emaciated and irrecognisable. In the following month—that is

to say on 21st September 1895—he was visited in prison by his wife, by special permission from the Home Office. His appearance produced upon the unfortunate woman an impression, from the shock of which she never recovered. After leaving the gaol she wrote to the friend who had induced her to take to the prisoner the solace of her forgiveness and love a pathetie letter, in which unconsciously she revealed how great her affection still was for her husband. "It was indeed awful," she wrote, "more so than I had conception of. I could not see him, and I could not touch him, and I scarcely spoke." It is in those words "I could not touch him" that one reads the love that still was in her; for *to touch* the cherished one is ever an instinctive prompting. The poor woman left him, having made up her mind, as she afterwards told the same friend, to take him back to her after his imprisonment was over. In the spring of the following year, as Oscar Wilde gratefully records in "De Profundis," she travelled all the way from Genoa to London to break to him the terrible news of his mother's death. This was the last time that the two met. After Oscar Wilde's release circumstances arose which delayed their definite reconciliation, and then came that which parts the tenderest spouses. Constance

Deaths within the District of the British Consulate at Genoa.

No.	When and Where Died.	Name and Surname	Sex.	Age	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Death.	Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.	When Registered.	Signature of Diplomatic or Consular Officer.
533	7th April in 1898 Genoa	Constance Mary Wilde née Lloyd	female	40	Married woman	Genoa	Otho Holland Lloyd Gentleman Bevaix Canton Newchatel Switzerland	9 April 1898	Wm Keene H B M. Consul

I, William Keene Esquire, His Britannic Majesty's Consul General at Genoa do hereby certify, That this is a true Copy of the Entry of the Death of Constance Mary Wilde (née Lloyd) No. 533 in the Register Book of Deaths kept at this Consulate General day of December 1905

Witness my Hand and Seal, this 26th

H. B M Consul General.

CONSTANCE WILDE'S DEATH CERTIFICATE.

Wilde, who had been long ailing, and who had never recovered from the horrible shock of the catastrophe which shattered her home, was released, from a world so full of cruel surprise to the simple and gentle, by death. She died in Genoa about one year after her husband had left prison. She was a simple, beautiful woman, too gentle and good for the part that life called upon her to play. She was a woman of heart whom kindlier gods would never have thrown into the turmoil and stress of an existence which was all a battle.

Her death was to Oscar Wilde's affectionate heart a sorrow which accentuated his despair. His love for her, for the very reason that it never was a strong physical attachment, was pure, deep, and reverent. "From a poet to a poem" is what he once wrote in her album. This apparent cynic was, in fact, endowed with all the family virtues which men love to record of the departed. His conduct towards his mother is known; and as a husband he was what he had been as a son. These Irishmen are very wonderful in their loyalty towards their own kin. He was no friend of his brother in his lifetime, but he never allowed anyone to say in his presence a single word of disparagement about him. He quarrelled with several friends who had ventured

to speak slightingly about Willy : that ten years' quarrel with a famous Irish writer, to which reference has been made, arose from no other cause. After Willy's death his memory had a champion in Oscar Wilde. For his children he felt deep affection. Ernest La Jeunesse in that masterly article which he wrote after Wilde's death relates what a revelation it was to him to hear Oscar speaking about his sons. It showed a new man to him ; an Oscar Wilde whom he had not known, of whose existence he had never had the joyful comprehension. He spoke so simply, like a good father, and with such joy and gladness. The passage is one which—in an essay that to read is pure delight from the beauty of the thing—forces tears even from those who are reluctant to yield to such emotions in the midst of the highest spiritual delight. To many people who knew Oscar Wilde well the statement of his domestic virtues will appear unwarranted. It should be remembered of him, however, that he took particular pains to cloak those qualities which might cause him to be compared to the general. A noticeable trait in his character was that although he was loudly assertive of his literary, artistic, and ethical principles he never spoke about himself as a man. He had a horror of

anything that resembled self-aggrandisement; and it cannot be doubted that he strove with all his power against that habit of self-accusation which at times was a pathetic feature of his conversation; because to speak evil of oneself even appears to the hypercritical and uncharitable only a subtle form of self-adulation.

In spite of the stringent prison regulations he appears to have had many opportunities for conversation, and records of such conversations have been jealously preserved. At the time when he was writing "De Profundis" he had one afternoon a long talk with a man in Reading Gaol, who, writing from memory, supplies for the purpose of this biography the following account of it :—

"We had been talking of Robert Emmet, when I incidentally remarked that it was curious that he an atheist should have made so many allusions to the Supreme Being and a future state in the course of his speech from the dock.

"'That was no doubt due to his Celtic temperament,' said Oscar Wilde. 'Those who are governed by their emotions are more given to hero-worship and the worship of the gods than practical people who believe in logic and are governed by what they choose to term their reason. Imaginative people will invariably be

religious people for the simple reason that religion has sprung from the imagination.'

"I pointed out that Shelley and Voltaire were highly imaginative people and were sceptics.

"'Of course,' he replied, 'we must allow for exceptions. I am one myself, but it is an open question whether the two poets you mention were unbelievers or simply agnostics. Besides, one's religious opinions are often greatly influenced by private and local events or national contingencies. I daresay the oppression of Church and State on the poor in France was the direct cause of Voltaire's apostasy.'

"'And may have led to yours,' I ventured to say.

"He remained silent for some time, then stepped aside to allow a fly, which was floating round the door, to enter his cell. 'You see,' he observed, watching its movements, 'it will be company for me when you have gone.' I laughed, and repeated my question.

"'What,' he said, 'was the cause of my becoming a man? Remember I once was a child.'

"'Well,' I said hesitatingly, 'I suppose it was natural development.'

"'Just so,' he answered, 'and the cause of my apostasy is spiritual development, or the

natural evolution of the mind. You will observe that the various races of the world have various forms of supernatural belief, and if you examine closely into those forms you will find they accord more or less with the racial characteristics of the people who hold them. And what is true in regard to races is equally true when applied to individuals, I mean individuals who can claim individuality—each one makes his own God, and I have made mine. My God might not suit you, nor your God suit me, but as my God suits myself I wish to keep him, and when I feel so inclined to worship him.'

"'What is your God, then?' I asked. 'Art?'

"'No,' he said, 'Art is but the disciple, or, perhaps, I should say the Apostle. It was through Art I discovered him, and it is through Art I worship him. Christ, to me, is the one supreme Artist, and not one of the brush, or the pen, but, what is more rare, he was an Artist in words. It was by the voice he found expression—that's what the voice is for, but few can find it by that medium, and none in the manner born of Christ.'

"'If we acknowledge the divinity of Christ,' said I, 'neither his words nor his books, his fastings nor his final sufferings should excite our

admiration any more than the strength of the elephant or the fleetness of the deer. If we allow he was a supernatural being, gifted with miraculous power, his sufferings became a farce; they resemble a millionaire choosing to suffer the pangs of hunger in the midst of plenty, or the fanatic who deliberately inflicts pain on his body for the purification of his soul.'

"'The divinity of Christ,' said he, 'in its generally accepted sense, I, of course, do not believe, but I see no difficulty whatever in believing that he was as far above the people around him as though he had been an angel sitting on the clouds.' (Here followed a panegyric of Christ something similar to that drawn in "De Profundis.")

"On another occasion when speaking on the same subject I wished to know which label I would present him with, supposing I had a bundle containing the names of the world's religions and non-religions, and to say 'Take this it fits you.'

"He smiled and said he would not accept any one of them. 'This,' he said, touching the round piece of cardboard on his coat, "indicates my address, or rather the number of my room, and does so correctly, I daresay. But you couldn't find a card in your supposi-

titious bundle that would correspond with my religion.'

" ' Yours is a unique creed, then,' I responded, ' why not explain its tenets and you may make a convert ? '

" ' I do not want any converts,' he replied, ' the moment I discovered that anyone else shared my belief I would flee from it, I must either have it all to myself or not at all.'

" ' Selfish man ! ' I cried.

" ' To be a supreme Artist,' said he, ' one must first be a supreme Individualist.'

" ' You talk of Art,' said I, ' as though there were nothing else in the world worth living for.'

" ' For me,' said he sadly, ' there is nothing else.'

" ' Do you know," he said suddenly, ' the Bible is a wonderful book. How beautifully artistic the little stories are ! Adam and his wife alone in the beautiful garden, where they could have enjoyed all the pleasures of life by simply obeying the laws. But he refuses to become a machine, and so eats the apple—I, also, would have eaten that apple—and in consequence is expelled.'

" ' Then, young Joseph sold into Egypt as a slave, when he blossoms out as the ruler of a kingdom, and his subterfuge to obtain his brother. In nearly every chapter you can find

something so intensely interesting that one pauses to wonder how it all came to be written. The Psalms of David ; the Song of Solomon—how grand it is !—And the story of Daniel ; all appeal to me as a lover of language, and as a lover of Art. And if I am delighted with the Old Testament imagery I am charmed with the New. Christ, Paul, and most of the other characters in the book have for me a singular fascination. Then take the last book of all. How powerful must have been the imagination of the writer ! Why, I know of nothing in the whole world of Art to compare with it, especially those tenth, eleventh and twelfth chapters. Really, I have no sympathy with stupid people who cannot admire a book unless they believe in its literal truth.'

" I reminded him that the leading agnostics of the century had paid tribute to the beauty of the scriptures, and mentioned Renan, Huxley and Ingersoll.

" ' I very much admire,' he said, ' Renan's " Life of Jesus " ; and Huxley had a captivating style which is seldom to be met with in men of science, for instance, I remember reading where he said " that one could not be a true soldier of science and a soldier of the Cross," and I thought it a very fine sentence, although I did

not believe it, for between matter of fact and matter of faith there is a wide gulf which science cannot bridge.'

" ' When I go out from here I should like to find a quiet, nice little Church, I shouldn't in the least mind what its denomination was so long as it had a nice, simple-minded and good-hearted clergyman, one who had religion within himself and did not preach somebody else's opinions and practise somebody else's formulas, a man who thought of the sinner more than the stipend. I can never belong to any of the conventional forms of religion, but I should like to be able to extract the good there may be in all.' "

In " De Profundis " we have Wilde's own account of his prison and, of what it meant to him. In the following chapter we have an objective description of his life there. The warder's account of his character as it displayed itself in prison is confirmed by many witnesses. The man appeared to all who beheld him in prison as the *beau idéal* of the Christian gentleman. It is on record that on the night of his departure many of the wretched prisoners in Reading Gaol were rebuked and even punished for the loudness of their lamentations. One of these men said after his release, that when C. 3.3. went, his last hope seemed to have abandoned

him. His sympathy for his fellow-prisoners was so great that he often risked severe punishment in order to give to this one or to that the comfort of his consolations. Some of the notes which he wrote while in prison to fellow-prisoners are still in existence, and some have found their way into the market for curiosities. De Montaigne's remark is here applicable once more. There have been people who have seen in these notes, words of encouragement for the most part, the most evil meanings. His sympathy went beyond mere words. Through his friends he was enabled to help with money many of his fellow-prisoners, who, leaving the gaol destitute, would otherwise have fallen immediately back into crime. While he was in Reading Gaol some lads, mere children, were committed to prison for snaring rabbits. The magistrates had given these hardened poachers the option of paying fines, and it was with his money that Oscar Wilde enabled them to gain their freedom. After his release he befriended several of those whose acquaintance he had made in prison. Although he spoke of himself as an agnostic in gaol, as is recorded in the conversation above, he showed by his conduct that Christianity had altogether taken possession of him. The singular sweetness and charm of his manners after he came

out of prison, his tolerance, his gentleness, his entire self-effacement, impressed all those who came near him. The warder whose story now follows says of Oscar Wilde that in prison he appeared a saint. So, too, he appeared to many who saw him during the few months after his release, until fatality had driven him back to companionships in the atmosphere of which nothing that was good or noble could subsist.

CHAPTER XVII

THE POET IN PRISON [1]

(Written by one of the warders in Reading Gaol)

THERE are supreme moments in the lives of men, as there are events in the histories of nations, which mark epochs and stand out in bold relief from the many others which go to make up the sum-total of their existence. Those moments in the life of Mr Wilde were when he stepped out of the dock at the Old Bailey, a ruined man, and with a sentence of two years' imprisonment hanging over his unfortunate head.

There are days, months, and years in the lives of some men which to them are an eternity; for them the hand of Time has ceased to move; the clock no longer strikes the recurring hour; for them there is no dawn; there is no day—

[1] This chapter has been contributed to this biography by a man who was a warder in Reading Gaol at the time of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment there. The express condition under which it was contributed was that it should be printed exactly as it stood in the manuscript, with no alteration of a single phrase or word or expression. This condition has been faithfully observed, and the chapter has been printed as it was written.

occasionally, perhaps, a twilight, for, as the adage has it, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast";—they live through one long, bewildering night—a night of terror, a night of appalling darkness, unrelieved by a single star; a night of misery, a night of despair!

Two years' imprisonment meant to the Poet one long, dreary night—a night spent in an Inferno, a night without variation, a night without dreams: no dreams, but nightmares, rendered the more ghastly because of their terrible reality. —From them there was no awakening.—Nightmares wherein men were flogged! wherein men were executed!

Others, it may be urged, have been in prison before the Poet; others since and others now. Ah, yes! but they were not poets, they are not poets, in the sense he was. Their sufferings, no doubt, are great, but his were greater. Reared in the lap of luxury, living in an atmosphere of culture and refinement, he, the Apostle of Æstheticism, was suddenly hurled from the proud pinnacle on which his genius had placed him, and, without passing through any intermediate stage, found himself encased amid walls of iron and surrounded by bars of steel. He who formerly devoted himself to the producing of the highest works of Art, was now shredding

tarred ropes in a dismal cell. He, with a poet's weakness for adornment, was now attired in the garb of gloomy grey, taken from a prison wardrobe. He, to whom expression was life—nay, more than life itself—was suddenly reduced to a silence more silent than the grave ; and he who had made a name, glorious in the world of literature, had now only a number. His was worse than suffering ; his was a tragedy, and one of the greatest that the nineteenth century has to record.

For the first eighteen months of his imprisonment all the rigours of the system were applied to him relentlessly. He had to pick his quantity of oakum, or bear the punishment that was sure to follow ; turn the monotonous crank, along with his fellows, by which the prison was supplied with water ; read the silly books from the library, or pace his cell, a prey to his own sad thoughts, until his health broke down under the unnatural strain, and, to prevent his being sent to a madhouse, he was allowed the privilege of having a limited number of books, which were sent by friends, and which afterwards found a place amongst others less abstruse on the shelves of the prison library.

Later he was allowed a more important privilege—the privilege of writing—and to this

concession the world owes "De Profundis." He wrote mostly in the evenings, when he knew he would be undisturbed. In his cell were two wooden trestles, across which he placed his plank bed. This was his table, and, as he himself observed: "It was a very good table, too."

His tins he kept scrupulously clean; and in the mornings, after he had arranged them in their regulated order, he would step back, and view them with an air of child-like complacency.

He was dreadfully distressed because he could not polish his shoes or brush his hair. "If I could but feel clean," he said, "I should not feel so utterly miserable. These awful bristles"—touching his chin—"are horrid." Before leaving his cell to see a visitor he was always careful to conceal, as far as possible, his unshaven chin by means of his red handkerchief. He showed great agitation when a visitor was announced. "For I never know," he said, "what fresh sorrow may not have entered my life, and is, in this manner, borne to me, so that I may carry it to my cell, and place it in my already overstocked storehouse, which is my heart. My heart is my storehouse of sorrow!"

It was during the latter part of the Poet's imprisonment that the order was issued for "first offenders" to be kept apart from the

other prisoners. They were distinguished by two red stars, one of which was on the jacket and the other worn on the cap, and in consequence were known as "Star-class men." The order, not being retrospective, did not apply to the Poet, and in consequence he, like the remainder, had to stand with his face to the wall when any of the "star-class" were passing in his vicinity. The framers of the order were, no doubt, actuated by the best of motives, but its too literal interpretation caused it to look rather ludicrous. I have seen the Poet having to stand with his face to the wall while a villainous-looking ruffian, who had been convicted for half killing his poor wife, passed him. In fact, nearly every day he was forced to assume this undignified position, which might have been obviated but for the crass stupidity of officialdom.

In Church the Poet seemed to suffer from *ennui*. He sat in a listless attitude with his elbow resting on the back of his chair, his legs crossed, and gazed dreamily around him and above him.

There were times when he was so oblivious of his surroundings, so lost in reverie, that it required a friendly "nudge" from one of the "lost sheep" beside him to remind him that a

hymn had been given out, and that he must rise and sing, or at least appear to sing, his praises unto God.

When the Chaplain was addressing his shorn and grey-garbed flock, telling them how wicked they all were, and how thankful they should all be that they lived in a Christian country where a paternal Government was as anxious for the welfare of their souls as for the safe-keeping of their miserable bodies; that society did not wish to punish them, although they had erred and sinned against society; that they were undergoing a process of purification; that their prison was their purgatory, from which they could emerge as pure and spotless as though they had never sinned at all; that if they did so society would meet and welcome them with open arms; that they were the prodigal sons of the community, and that the community, against which they had previously sinned, was fattening calves to feast them, if they would but undertake to return to the fold and become good citizens,—the Poet would smile. But not his usual smile: this was a cynical smile, a disbelieving smile, and often it shadowed despair. "I long to rise in my place, and cry out," said he, "and tell the poor, disinherited wretches around me that it is not so; to tell them that they are society's

victims, and that society has nothing to offer them but starvation in the streets, or starvation and cruelty in prison ! "

I have often wondered why he never did cry out, why he was able to continue, day after day, the dull, slow round of a wearisome existence—an existence of sorrow : sorrow benumbed by its awful monotony ; an existence of pain, an existence of death.

But he faithfully obeyed the laws, and conscientiously observed the rules, prescribed by Society for those whom it consigns to the abodes of sorrow. I understand he was punished once for talking. I have no personal knowledge of the circumstance, but I know that it would be almost a miracle for one to serve two years' imprisonment without once being reported. Some of the rules are made with no other object than to be broken, so that an excuse may be found for inflicting additional punishment.[1] However, he could not have been punished by solitary confinement for fifteen days, as has been stated. A governor is not empowered to give more than three days. But twenty-four hours' bread and water is the usual punishment for talking, and, if it be the first offence, the delinquent is generally let off with a caution.

[1] The writer, it should be remembered, is a prison warder.

During the period of his incarceration the Poet suffered in health, but he seldom complained to the doctor. He was afraid of doing so lest he should be sent to the sick-ward. He preferred the seclusion of his cell. There he could think aloud without attracting the glances or the undertone comments of the less mobile-minded. There he could be alone—alone with the spectre of his past, alone with his books, alone with his God!

When I entered his cell on a certain bleak, raw morning in early March I found him still in bed. This was unusual, and so I expressed surprise. "I have had a bad night," he explained. "Pains in my inside, which I think must be cramp, and my head seems splitting." I asked whether he had better not report sick. "No," he said; "not for anything; I shall be better, perhaps, as the day advances. Come back in a few minutes, when I will be up."

I returned to his cell a few minutes afterwards, and found he was up, but looking so dreadfully ill that I again advised him to see the doctor. He declined, however, saying he would be all right when he had had something warm to drink.

I knew that in the ordinary course of events he would have nothing for at least another hour,

so I resolved to find something to give him in the meanwhile myself. I hastened off, and warmed up some beef-tea, poured it into a bottle, placed the bottle inside my jacket, and returned towards his cell. While ascending the staircase the bottle slipped between my shirt and skin. It was very hot. I knew that there was an unoccupied cell on the next landing, and I determined to go there and withdraw the bottle from its painful position. But at that moment a voice called me from the central hall below. I looked down, and saw the Chief Warder. He beckoned me towards him. I went back. He wished to speak concerning a discrepancy in the previous night's muster report. I attempted to elucidate the mystery of two prisoners being in the prison who had no claim on its hospitality. I am afraid I threw but little light on the mystery. I was in frightful agony. The hot bottle burned against my breast like molten lead. I have said "there are supreme moments in the lives of men." Those were supreme moments to me. I could have cried out in my agony, but dared not. The cold, damp beads of perspiration gathered on my brow; I writhed and twisted in all manners of ways to ease myself of the dreadful thing, but in vain. I could not shift that infernal bottle—try as I might.

It lay there against my breast like a hot poultice, but hotter than any poultice that was ever made by a cantankerous mother or by a cantankerous nurse. And the strange thing about it was that the longer it lay the hotter it became. The Chief eyed me curiously. I believe he thought I had been drinking. I know I was incoherent enough for anything. At last he walked off, and left me, for which I felt truly thankful. I bounded up the iron stairs, and entered the Poet's cell, and, pulling out the burning bottle, I related, amid gasps and imprecations, my awful experience. The Poet smiled while the tale was being told, then laughed—actully laughed. I had never seen him laugh *naturally* before, and, with the same qualification, I may add that I never saw him laugh again.

I felt angry because he laughed. I told him so. I said it was poor reward for all I had undergone to be laughed at, and, so saying, I came out, and closed the door—I closed it with a bang.

When I took him his breakfast he looked the picture of contrition. He said he wouldn't touch it unless I promised to forgive him.

"Not even the cocoa?" I asked.

"Not even the cocoa," he replied; and he looked at it longingly.

"Well, rather than starve you, I'll forgive you."

"And supposing I laugh again?" said he, with a smile.

"I sha'n't forgive you again," I said.

The following morning he handed me a sheet of foolscap blue official paper. "Here is something," said he, "which is not of much value now, but probably may be if you keep it long enough."

I had no opportunity of reading then, but when I had read it I was struck by the power and beauty of its expresssion. It was headed: "An Apology," and written in his old, original, and racy style. The flow of subtle humour, the wit and charm of the many epigrams, the naïvete contained in some of the personal allusions, were captivating. As a lover of style, I was captivated, and told him so.

"Ah!" said he, "I never thought to resume that style again. I had left it behind me as a thing of the past, but yesterday morning I laughed, which showed my perversity, for I really felt sorry for you. I did not mean to laugh: I had vowed never to laugh again. Then I thought it fitting when I had broken one vow to break the other also. I had made two, and I broke both, but now I have made them

again. I never intend to laugh, nor do I intend ever again to write anything calculated to produce laughter in others. I am no longer the Sirius of Comedy. I have sworn solemnly to dedicate my life to Tragedy. If I write any more books, it will be to form a library of lamentations. They will be written in a style begotten of sorrow, and in sentences composed in solitude, and punctuated by tears. They will be written exclusively for those who have suffered or are suffering. I understand them, and they will understand me. I shall be an enigma to the world of Pleasure, but a mouthpiece for the world of Pain."

In conversation the Poet was always perfectly rational. His every action during the day was rational, but, when left to himself in the evening, he underwent a transformation, or, it might be more appropriate to term it, a transfiguration. It was when he was alone in his cell, when the doors were double-locked, when the gas was flickering, when the shadows of night were falling, when all was quiet, when all was dead. The grim and watchful warder moves around with velvety tread. There is a still and awful silence—a silence in the warder's slippers, a silence in the cells, a silence in the air. The dark, sombre shadow stops at the door of each living sepulchre,

and gazes in ; he peers through the aperture of glass, to satisfy himself that the tomb has not become too realistic, that it still contains the living, that none have dared to cheat the law —have dared to baffle Justice.

The view is nearly the same in each : a drab and ghostly figure seated on a stool, finishing the day's task, which will be collected at the hour of eight, or, if he has already finished his work, he sits staring with vacant eyes into vacancy, or looks for consolation in the Book of Common Prayer.

The watching figure glides on, now stops, peers into another cell near the end of the corridor. The cell is marked C.3.3.—it is the cell of the Poet ! Around the whole circle of living sepulchres no sight like this ! No sight more poignant ! No sight more awe-inspiring ! No sight more terrible. The Poet is now alone ! Alone with the Gods ! Alone with the Muse !

He is pacing his cell—one, two, three. Three steps when he has to turn. Three steps and turn again. His hands behind his back, a wrist encircled by a hand, and thus backwards and forwards, to and fro, he goes, his head thrown back, *smiling*—but, Heavens, what a smile !

His eyes—those wonderful eyes!—are fairly dancing. Now they are looking towards the ceiling—but far beyond the ceiling, looking even beyond the depths of airy space, looking into the infinite. Now he laughs! What a laugh! Piercing, poignant, bitter—all and more are condensed in that awful laugh. His powerful imagination is at work. Though his body is in fetters his soul is free—for who can chain the soul of a poet? It roams on high and mighty altitudes—high above the haunts of men. Then higher yet, above the silvery clouds, it soars, and finds a resting-place among the pale shadows of the moon.

Then back to earth it comes with one fell stroke, as lightning flashed from heaven—back through the iron window, back to the prison cell. Hush! . . . He speaks! . . . He breathes the sacred name of Mother, and calls his wife by name! He sheds a tear, it glistens on his cheek, when, lo! an angel comes and the tear evaporates. And thus his life, whate'er he may have done, was purged from his account by one hot tear that trickled from a heart redeemed and purified by suffering. But hark! He speaks again. He addresses an imaginary visitor, with hands outstretched towards his little stool:

"Long, long ago, in boyhood's days, I had a fond ambition:
I intended to reform the world, and alter its condition.
I raised myself—through Art alone—to a very high position,
And now, my friend, you see me, a poor victim of attrition."

He laughs again, and repeats the last few words: "A victim of attrition. Piti-less attrition." He turns away, and resumes his melancholy walk; then stops once more before his visionary visitor, and raises his finger. "The world," he says, with a tinge of egotism, "is not so solid after all. I can shake it with an epigram and convulse it with a song."

He laughs once more, then sinks upon the prison stool, and bows his head. And here we leave him to think his thoughts alone—Alone!

Let no one mock those nightly scenes, and say the Poet was not sincere. In prison he was the very soul of sincerity—and remember, no man can wear a mask in prison. You may deceive the governor, you may deceive the chaplain, you may deceive the doctor, but you cannot deceive the warder. His eye is upon you when no other eye sees you, during your hours of sleep as well as during your hours of wakefulness.

What the Poet was before he went to prison I care not. What he may have been after he left prison I know not. One thing I know, however, that while in prison he lived the life

of a saint, or as near that holy state as poor mortal can ever hope to attain.

His gentle smile of sweet serenity was something to remember. It must have been a smile like this that Bunyan wore as he lay in Bedford Gaol dreaming his wonderful dreams. It must have been a similar smile that illumined the noble face of St Francis of Assisi when he spoke of "his brother the wind and his sister the rain."

Had Hugo been an artist with the brush as he was artist with the pen he would have depicted such a smile as shimmering over the features of the good bishop when he told his great white lie to save poor Jean Valjean. And, who can say that the Prince of Peace Himself would have considered such a smile unworthy of His countenance as He uttered the sweet words of invitation to the little children whom the disciples wished to keep away? One can remember such a smile although one's pen fails to describe its sweetness, as it fails to describe the sweet perfume of the rose. It was a smile of resignation, a smile of benevolence, a smile of innocence, a smile of love.

Farewell, brave heart! May your sleep be as peaceful as your smile. May the angels hover around your tomb in death as they hovered

around your tomb in life. And, had you been destitute of every other attribute that goes to make the perfect man, that smile alone would have served you as your passport through the gates of Paradise and onwards to the Great White Throne!

Farewell! I have kept my promise. I have remembered you during all the years that have intervened since that memorable day we shook hands and parted in your cold and cheerless cell. You asked me to think of you sometimes. I have thought of you always; scarcely one single day has passed since then that I have not thought of you—you who were at once my prisoner and my friend.

PAUL ADAM, ONE OF THE MOST DISTINGUISHED NOVELISTS AND WRITERS IN FRANCE. PUBLISHED A SYMPATHETIC ARTICLE ABOUT WILDE AT THE TIME OF HIS DOWNFALL, AND HAD PERSISTENTLY PROCLAIMED HIS ADMIRATION FOR WILDE'S GENIUS AND HIS CONDEMNATION OF THE WAY IN WHICH HE WAS TREATED. MONSIEUR ADAM ENJOYS THE FULLEST CONFIDENCE OF THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT.

CHAPTER XVIII

Oscar Wilde released—Sebastian Melmoth—Berneval—How he appeared to his Friends—The Prison Taint—Degradation which had not degraded—Why he could not work—"The Case of Warder Martin"—"Don't read this"—"The Ballad of Reading Gaol"—He proceeds to Naples—His Condition there—As to one of his Friends—He returns to Paris—The Testimony of the Police—Monsieur Dupoirier—His last Moments—Oscar Wilde is released—His Burial and Grave—*Post Funera*—His Continental Reputation—The Significance of this Spendthrift Loss.

AFTER his release from Reading Gaol—having refused the offer of certain American journalists to pay him a large sum for an account of his life in prison, with the remark he could not understand that such offers should be made to a gentleman—he immediately crossed over to France. His deference to English society was such that he felt that, having offended his country, he must consign himself to a perpetual exile from England. For the rest, he had reason to expect sympathy and welcome in France, where his case at the time of his downfall had been widely discussed, with general commiseration. It was held that the man had been very harshly dealt with. Several prominent men had written about him. Henri de Régnier and Paul Adam,

who already at that time held high positions in French literature, in which to-day they rank as masters, had published articles describing his great good qualities, and paying respectful homage to the convict in Wandsworth Gaol. Henri Bauer, an influential critic, had published an account of Wilde's condemnation and the treatment that was being dealt out to him, which thrilled civilised France with horror. A house had been taken for him at a village called Berneval, on the sea-coast to the N.E. of Dieppe. He had assumed the name of Sebastian Melmoth, and his immediate purpose was to live here in retirement, giving himself up to work. Those amongst his friends who had means had subscribed a sum which was handed to him on his release, and there was also paid over to him the balance of a gift of one thousand pounds which had been applied to his purposes during his confinement.

There is no worse school for husbandry than a place where money has no use. The truth of this is shown by the unvarying recklessness of sailors. Prisoners display on their release an extravagance as imprudent. The ship, as the gaol, obliterates all notions of the value of money. In Oscar Wilde's case contributory causes were his native generosity and the new

feeling of charity which filled his softened heart. His resources melted away in his hands; he sent presents of money to many of his late fellow-prisoners; he entertained at Dieppe a band of Montmartre poets, and at Berneval, on the occasion of the Queen's Jubilee, the whole village school of children; he rescued the poet Ernest Dowson from a position of great embarrassment at the inn at Arques. He spent money with the recklessness of sailors on shore and prisoners free of gaol. No doubt it pleased him—could not help but please him, having been humiliated so long—to enjoy the power which money gives in the spending of it. He was only a man after all, with human weaknesses. That he did feel the humiliation is shown in another way. There are in existence some letters which he wrote to the warder who had befriended him. In one of these he indulges in the delicious pleasure of rebuking in his turn one of the class under whose domination and rebuke he had lived for so many months. The man had written to him as "Oscar Wilde," "Care of Sebastian Melmoth," and this is how Oscar Wilde reproves him: "I must begin by scolding you thoroughly for a piece of carelessness on your part. I told you I had changed my name, and wrote out most carefully for you my new

name and address—in spite of this you write to me on the envelope as Oscar Wilde, Esqre., Care of Sebastian Melmoth. Now, this was silly of you. I changed my name so as not to be bothered, and then you go and write to me as Oscar Wilde. You must be careful and thoughtful about things. Just as much trouble is caused by carelessness as by crime, my friend." Lower down he tells the man—who was anxious to leave the prison service, that he has recommended him for a post, and adds: "I have spoken highly of your character and intellect. Let me beg of you to deserve all I have said of you. You have, I think, a good chance of a good place, so you must be as sound and straightforward and as good a fellow as possible."

He hankered after respectability. In inviting friends to visit him at Berneval he used to ask those who were married to bring their wives with them, as though he felt that the presence of ladies under his roof would vouch for its respectability in his own eyes. He may have fancied that prison had attainted him. It would have been difficult for him to avoid such a feeling. In his case there was not a single thing he ever said, nor a single thing he ever did, not a glance, not a flash of expression, not the shadow of a thought, that could have betrayed

to the keenest observer, ignorant of the fact, that this man had spent two years as a common prisoner in a common gaol. Degradation had failed to degrade him. His intimates noticed only how vastly improved he was in physique, in nerve and muscle, in energy and courage; how his whole being seemed rejuvenated, his whole character sweetened. They attributed it to the prison *régime*; for in those days they did not know how, in the lonely meditation of his cell, he had found the true secret of life. He showed himself to those who had the privilege of seeing him during the weeks which he spent in Berneval a gentleman, a hero, and a Christian.

It is the privilege and the distinction of those who take Christ as their model in life, who follow Him in humility, in resignation, and kindness, to receive at the hands of men treatment no other than that which was accorded to Him also. One cannot doubt that a man so keen of intelligence as Oscar Wilde well foresaw, when he came to that determination which he so eloquently sets forth in "De Profundis," what the world would reserve for one who should oppose to cruelty, mansuetude; to insult, forbearance; to hatred, forgiveness; and to contempt, the sublime pity which charity inspires. He was admirably instructed in the ways of

society: he was essentially a man of the world. He could give, in the old days, the most useful advice on how best to act in the worldly sense. A friend recalls how he once said of suicide that it was wrong, because it was the highest compliment that an individual could pay to society. Of course, he knew, when he left prison in the state of mind into which he had schooled himself, exactly what he had to expect from the world. He had accepted in advance all the outrages that were to be heaped upon him; deliberately he had entered upon a martyrdom for which the world was to refuse him any crown. With his great powers and the renewed vigour of his body he could have dominated the world. To effect that, as we now see if we direct our eyes towards Germany, he had but to let himself live. But Christianity possessed him; he had laid aside all combativeness, and he allowed himself to die.

His noble purpose he maintained during those first months with a courage which surprised his friends. Only on very rare occasions did a flash of regret for the things that he had lost disclose some streak of bitterness in his heart. There were very rare moments when he spoke with irritation, of which it was but too easy for his friends to trace the cause.

From the very first he had the great mortification to find that, under the new circumstances of his life, work would be difficult to him. That is to say, he recognised from the first that, as he could no longer write under his name, he would be unable to produce anything worthy of himself. He was one of those artists who write for fame; for whom the money consideration is nothing. He could not constrain himself to hack-work: anonymity's black cloak enshrouded his brain. He needed applause; he thirsted after personal triumph—those were essential factors in his artistic temperament. So though he never spoke more brilliantly than during the last years of his life, because there the reward was immediate in the applause of the marvelling listeners, he wrote nothing, all stimulus being lacking.

We have in a letter which he addressed to a working man in Reading, after his letter, "The Case of Warder Martin" had appeared in *The Daily Chronicle* (28th May 1897), the pathetic proof of this natural hunger for applause, which gives to the great starvation of literary artists its keenest pang.

"What does Reading say to it all?" he asks. "Have you seen any of the warders? I suppose not." Then he passes on to other things,

but presently comes back to the subject of his famishing curiosity. "Have you heard anything said about me, with reference to my letter? Anything nice?" In the many pathetic letters from his pen which are in existence, one will search in vain for a passage more pathetic than this. And we are to remember that the man who was so anxious to hear that people were talking about him as a literary artist had only a few days previously refused with indignation to lend himself to the wide publicity offered by American correspondents. It was not notoriety after which he hankered; it was recognition of his literary powers.

"The Case of Warder Martin," which has frequently been reprinted since his death, was a plea for the better treatment of children in prison in particular, and in general for the more humane application of the right of punishment. It is a noble plea, written in noble language, and the best documentary evidence that the most exacting can demand of the complete mental recovery and wonderful psychological transformation of its author. Let any man read first "The Importance of being Earnest," which was the last thing he wrote before going into prison, and next this letter in the *Chronicle*, and then say, if he dare, that Oscar Wilde's an-

nouncement in " De Profundis," that meditation had made a new and different man of him, was lure and deception.

He returned to the subject of prison treatment in a letter entitled " Don't read this if you want to be Happy to-day," which appeared in the *Chronicle* on 24th March 1898. These two letters, and his " Ballad of Reading Gaol," of which the *leit-motiv* is no different, are all that he wrote after his release from prison. He was keenly interested in this subject of prison reform. Amongst the books which were found in his room in the hotel where he died were several in which this subject is treated. He had John Howard's book on " Prisons," and a number of magazines containing articles on prison life.

" The Ballad of Reading Gaol " has been described by certain authorities as the finest ballad in the English language. In July 1904 there appeared in *The Nineteenth Century*, in an article by Lady Currie, entitled " Enfants Trouvés of Literature," a critical notice of this poem. The name of the review in which this appeared is significant, when we remember what Oscar Wilde had said, in one of his prison conversations, about the way in which his name would be regarded in that quarter. Lady Currie writes of the " terrible ' Ballad of Reading Gaol,'

with its splendours and inequalities, its mixture of poetic force, crude realism, and undeniable pathos." The writer adds lower down : " All is grim concentrated tragedy from cover to cover. A friend of mine," she continues, " who looked upon himself as a judge in such matters, told me that he would have placed certain passages in this poem, by reason of their terrible, tragic intensity, upon a level with some of the descriptions in Dante's ' Inferno,' were it not that ' The Ballad of Reading Gaol ' was so much more infinitely human."

In the preface to the translation of André Gide's mischievous memoir of Oscar Wilde is quoted the following extract from a review in one of the leading London papers :—

" The whole is awful as the pages of Sophocles. That he has rendered with his fine art so much of the essence of his life and the life of others in that inferno to the sensitive is a memorable thing for the social scientist, but a much more memorable thing for literature. This is a simple, a poignant, a great ballad, one of the greatest in the English language."

It is very certain that there is in poetic description nothing in the world's literature more powerful, more overwhelming, than the account Oscar Wilde gives of the sleepless night which

he spent on the eve of the execution, those verses ending with the lines :

" At last I saw the shadowed bars,
Like a lattice wrought in lead,
Move right across the whitewashed wall
That faced my three-plank bed,
And I knew that somewhere in the world
God's awful dawn was red."

The very nature of a ballad demands a certain naïvete of expression, a certain laxity in the rhymes. It is, however, a curious thing that it is a makeshift rhyme which is used in the one verse that, while it appeals most strongly to those who are morbid-minded, inspires some of the poet's friends with the feeling that it shows that, in spite of his splendid renovation, the obliquity of vision which was ever one of his great defects had not altogether been overcome.

These are the lines referred to :

" Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword ! "

The thing is not true ; if it were true it is badly expressed, and what is intended for antithesis degenerates on examination into anti-climax. Yet many find these lines the finest

in a ballad which is filled with beauties. Was this the poor man's final indulgence in his elfin joy in " astounding fools," or was he in earnest ?

The Ballad was published early in 1898. Oscar Wilde had expended over it an immense amount of labour. It had been revised and corrected with a precise regard of even the slightest detail, of which we get some conception from the many letters which he wrote to his publisher, Mr Leonard Smithers, while the book was passing through the press. Almost each word in the poem was made the subject of long consideration, of discussion. He advises on changes in the punctuation. The rudiments had caught him up at last.

These same letters give evidence of the very mournful condition to which he had at last come. They are full, on the one hand, of descriptions of his poverty and needs; on the other of recriminations against his friends. In one letter we read : " My present position is so awful that I began to-day a modern social comedy—and would in consequence have had an excellent appetite for dinner had there been any dinner."

Elsewhere he threatens suicide. " I shall take steps," he says.

He was then living in Naples. The circum-

stances under which he had been obliged to leave Berneval, and to return to the least desirable companionship that the world of men offered to his choice, are summed up in the following sentence by the author of "Twenty Years in Paris":—

"The time came, however, when, being without money, repulsed, abandoned, desolate, he could no longer resist entreaties which offered to him companionship in the place of utter loneliness, friendship in the place of hostility, homage in the place of insult, and in the place of impending destitution a luxurious and elegant hospitality."

Measures were, however, taken at once by third parties to break up this association, and, all supplies being refused, Oscar Wilde's condition in Naples became the hazardous existence which he describes in his letters to Smithers. His irritation at the collapse of his resolutions, at their overthrow by the very force of things, was so great that he turned upon all men. He wrote abusive letters to his friends, not even sparing the noblest of them, Robert Ross, the subject of the glowing eulogy which one finds in "De Profundis." Those words are letters patent of immortality; but simple justice, not lordly generosity, directed that splendid tribute.

This Robert Ross's conduct towards Oscar Wilde was and is the most beautiful thing that the history of noble friendships records. That he gave him everything that he had may be nothing; it may be nothing that he bore obloquy and endured suffering for his sake; that he visited him constantly in prison; that he fought and worked unceasingly to safeguard his friend's interests, keeping a level and commercial head in the midst of the unceasing onslaughts of the harpies who kept swooping down upon Oscar Wilde's prostrate body; that he watched over him like a tender brother during those awful months in Paris; that he was with him in his last illness, tending him with the gentleness of a sister of charity; that it was he who brought God at last into the gloomy room in the Hotel d'Alsace, and so obtained that the man who was accursed of men went out of this world with the kiss of pardon on his forehead, with body sanctified and anointed, under the shadow of the cross; that he ordained his honourable obsequies, and was one of the very rare mourners who followed him to the grave. All these things, from the nature of the man, may be nothing; but what is unusual and splendid, a disillusion to the pessimists, a delight to those who, *quand même*, would think well of humanity,

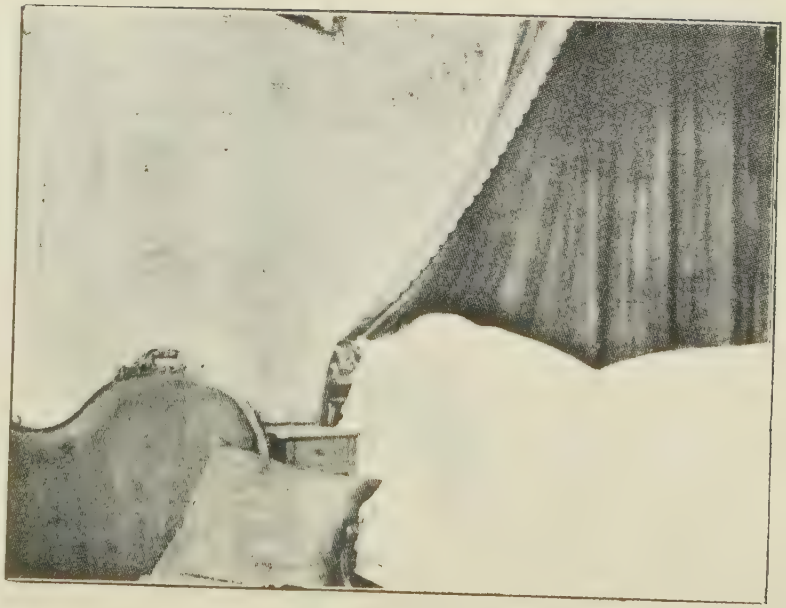
MONSIEUR DUPOIRIER, LANDLORD OF THE HOTEL D'ALSACE. OSCAR WILDE DIED IN HIS ARMS.

is that, though five years have now passed since Oscar Wilde died, he pursues quietly the level way of his noble friendship. He is one of the very rare people with whom the dead do not die quick. He goes on being good to Oscar Wilde. He devotes his means to the payment of his friend's creditors. He jealously fosters his friend's literary reputation. He watches over his grave at Bagneux, looking forward to the day when he shall be able, of his own means, to secure a permanent and worthier resting-place for his ashes. Such constancy after death is not a virtue of which humanity has warranted the expectation. Devotion dies by slow degrees when the loved one is no longer anything but a memory, a name. Evil breeds evil; but here also good was bred, and in this mournful history this friendship is a beautiful and pleasant thing.

Oscar Wilde lived for three and a half years after his release from prison. After he had left Italy he returned to Paris. Here for some time he resided in a hotel in the Rue Marsollier. He was forced to leave this house because he could not pay his bill. He was literally turned out into the streets. From this position he was rescued by the landlord of a small hotel in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, Monsieur Dupoirier, who

had known him in his prosperous days. Dupoirier offered him rooms in his house, and went to the hotel in the Rue Marsollier, and discharged the bill, recovering Wilde's property. From that time on Wilde resided at Number 13 Rue des Beaux-Arts, which is within five minutes' walk of the Hotel Voltaire of his imperial days. He had no superstitious dread of the number of the house, which was to be his final dwelling-place, though, like all great minds, he entertained many other superstitions. One can understand this. The great mind recognises, what the fool does not, that there are powers in the universe of which he has no comprehension, although he discerns their manifestations. Oscar Wilde was superstitious. For instance, he considered it very unlucky to drive in a carriage which was drawn by a white horse.

Of the Hotel d'Alsace it would not be fair to say that it was squalid. It is related that Monsieur Dupoirier remarked, after Wilde's death, that it was very unfair for the newspaper writers to speak of his house as a hotel of the tenth order, when the fact was that it was *une maison de cinquième categorie*. It was the kind of house where regular lodgers are few, and where the profits of the undertaking are derived mainly from stray visitors. At the back of the house



BED IN THE HOTEL D'ALSACE,
on which Oscar Wilde died.

was a small yard or garden, where Oscar often used to sit of afternoons, reading books and sipping absinthe.

It has been stated that his life in Paris during this period was one of shameful relapse. Calumny is still at work with his memory. The fact should be put on record that he was at all times under the close supervision of the police. An influential friend of his once asked Henri Bauer to use his interest with the Minister of Fine Arts on Oscar Wilde's behalf. Henri Bauer afterwards reported that the Minister had said that he would do nothing for a man who frequented such company as Oscar Wilde was in the habit of frequenting, that the police were carefully watching him, and that on the least provocation he would be arrested. Now, as he was never interfered with to the time of his death, it seems very clear that he did nothing that warranted such interference, and that calumny has discovered what the spies of the Rue de Jérusalem failed to observe.

One wonders who the associates were to whom the police had referred in their report to the Minister. The people with whom he used to be seen were reputable enough as the large tolerance of Paris goes. The poor man could not choose his associates, and as he loved to talk he

was sometimes glad, in his loneliness, of any audience.

He appears, at least during the last year of his life, to have been provided with means. His incurable generosity, no doubt, accounts for the fact that, though his monthly bill at Dupoirier's hotel was never a large one, he died owing the friendly little man close upon one hundred pounds, and that there were many other debts in Paris. Dupoirier's bill, and some of the other accounts, have since been paid—we need not ask by what devoted friend.

Of the awful tragedy of his last months Ernest La Jeunesse gives a striking account in his article in the *Revue Blanche*. Here is a short passage describing his condition towards the end:

"He has been into the country and to Italy, he longs for Spain, he wishes to return to the shores of the Mediterranean: all that he can have is Paris, a Paris which shuts door after door against him, a Paris which has no longer more to offer him than holes into which he may creep to drink, a Paris which is deaf, a famished, spasmodic Paris, flushed here, there pale, a city without eternity and with no myth. Each day brings sufferings with it for him, he has no longer either a court or a true friend, he falls

report — de 23 — 944 90
depart — 1113 40
report — 17 50
de Mr au garçon — 3 18
Il bureau de placement — 2 86 30
total — 318.

Total — 2683
reçu de Mlle Ross — 200 —
le 2 X bre 1900 — 2083

—

HOTEL D'ALSACE

J. DUPOIRIER

13, Rue des Beaux-Arts, 13

DÉJEUNERS & DINERS - SERVICE A VOLONTÉ

APPARTEMENTS & CHAMBRES MEUBLÉS

SONNERIE ELECTRIQUE

M. Mackmobb — Doit

PARIS le 2 X bre 1900

		Timbre		
Nov 1/18	1 mois de chambre		90	
	1 chambre de domestique		20	
9 bre 23	1 bouillon gl une tasse		5	
	œufs et fromage		50	
	1 carafe vin ordinaire		1	70
	2 Cafés noirs 0 80		1	60
	11 bl de Gaz intérieure 0 70		1	70
	2 dîners 0 70		1	40
	1 demi-bouteille vin			90
	3 bl de fantaisie 0 70		2	10
	1 chocolat complet			90
	4 œufs de choix 0 70		2	80
	2 fromages de bons			40
	6 fois cuvette de table et fourchette		1	20
	3 cafés complets 0 60		1	80
	4 fois glace 0 70			80
	total		175	90
	[illegible]		[illegible]	

into the blackest neurasthenia. . . . He is haunted with the foreboding of death, which in the end will kill him."

For months before he died he suffered from pains in the head. At the same time he was lashing his moribund energies by the use of alcohol. Dupoirier relates that he used to write all night, keeping his strength alive with brandy.

In the end the pains grew so intolerable that the doctors said that an operation would be necessary. But the operation threatened to be a very difficult one, for it was impossible to locate the exact spot where surgical treatment would benefit the patient. Only one of the great masters of surgery could be trusted, so the physicians said, with such an operation. A huge fee was mentioned as the amount that would probably be demanded by such a master. "Ah, well, then," said Oscar, "I suppose that I shall have to die beyond my means." "He must have suffered terribly," says Dupoirier, "for he kept raising his hands to his head to try and ease the torture. He cried out again and again. We used to put ice on his head. I was ever giving him injections of morphine." Robert Ross was with him at the end. That he brought a Roman Catholic priest to the dying man has already been recorded with a recog-

nition of the kindness of the act. There was another friend also in attendance. But fate would have it that neither of the two were there when Oscar Wilde breathed his last. This was at two o'clock on the afternoon of 30th November 1900. Dupoirier was holding him in his arms when he passed away.

He had foreseen that he would not live to see the dawn of the new century. A journalist has recorded a remark that Oscar Wilde made in this connection.

"The last time I saw him," he writes, "was about three months before he died. I took him to dinner at the Grand Café. He was then perfectly well and in the highest spirits. All through dinner he kept me delighted and amused. Only afterwards, just before I left him, he became rather depressed. He actually told me that he didn't think he was going to live long; he had a presentiment, he said. I tried to turn it off into a joke, but he was quite serious. 'Somehow,' he said, 'I don't think I shall live to see the new century.' Then a long pause. 'If another century began, and I was still alive, it would really be more than the English could stand.'"

He was buried in Bagneux Cemetery on 3rd December 1900, where he lies in the 17th Grave

Wilde **146**

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
LIBERTÉ — ÉGALITÉ — FRATERNITÉ

PRÉFECTURE DU DÉPARTEMENT DE LA SEINE

EXTRAIT des minutes des actes de décès

Du 6 Arrondissement de Paris

(Année 1900.)

ÉTAT CIVIL

Il est dû pour le présent extrait.

Savoir

Timbre	fr. c. 1 80
Droit d'expédition	» 75
Total	2 55

Nota. — La légalisation coûte 0 25 c. en sus des frais ci-dessus.

VU PAR NOUS Mr [illegible] JUGE DE PAIX DU [illegible] ARRONDISSEMENT DE PARIS, POUR LÉGALISATION DE LA SIGNATURE DE Mr [illegible] LE PRÉSIDENT DU TRIBUNAL DE 1re INSTANCE DE LA SEINE PARIS, LE 24 AOUT 1905

L'AN mil neuf cent le premier décembre à neuf heures du matin

ACTE DE DÉCÈS de Oscar Fingall O'Flaherty Wills Wilde, quarante-six ans, homme de lettres, né à Dublin (Irlande) domicilié à Paris rue des Beaux-Arts 13, y décédé le trente novembre courant à deux heures du soir, fils de William Wilde et de mère dont les noms ne nous sont pas connus, décédé veuf de Constance Marie Lloyd

DRESSÉ par Nous, Théodore Bourgé adjoint Maire, Officier de l'état civil du sixième arrondissement de Paris chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, après nous être assuré du décès sur la déclaration de Reginald Gesling

âgé de cinquante-huit ans négociant demeurant à Paris rue de Rivoli 3

et de Robert Ross

âgé de trente ans homme de lettres demeurant à Paris rue des Beaux-Arts 13, nous pensons que ces signés avec nous ont lecture du présent acte et signatures.

Pour copie conforme

Paris, le vingt-deux Août mil neuf cent cinq

LE MAIRE,

of the 8th Row of the 15th Division. The inscription on his tomb is as follows :—

OSCAR WILDE

Oct. 16*th.*, 1854 *Nov.* 30*th.*, 1900

Verbis meis addere nihil audebant et
super illos stillabat eloquium meum.
JOB xxix. 22.

R.I.P.

The five years' lease of this grave was renewed in 1905 by Robert Ross, who hopes before that period has elapsed to be able to remove the ashes to a permanent resting-place in one of the Parisian cemeteries, when the friends and admirers of the poet will be able, if they wish to do so, to raise a monument over his grave.

" Deaths are apt to be tragic," is the comment which was made upon his passing by one who described his last hours. His death, coming when it did, avoidable as it was, wasteful as it was, was more cruel and more tragic than any passing of which literary history has record. If he had only taken care of himself ; if someone had been by him to take care of him ! Time was preparing for him a splendid triumph. The harvest was near to the ripening. England had rejected him, sacrificing the artist to the mental patient, but other countries, indifferent to everything but the

artist's work, were just about to open their arms. If he could have lived only three or four short years longer he would have found in the plaudits of the whole Continent some solace for all his terrible sufferings. In Germany he is to-day a "World's Poet," and "Salomé" is a "World's Play." And we are not to dispute the literary taste of Germany. Oscar Wilde has been placed high in Germany's Walhalla. In Italy his success is no less startling. The Italians do not resent the comparison of him to the divine Alighieri. It may be very foolish, very wrong, but it simply is so. Nor have his sufferings, the miserable story of his life, created interest through pity, and set afoot a passing mode. A large number of Germans know nothing about the man Oscar Wilde, barely know his name, and yet are enthusiasts about his work. A friend of his, travelling to Russia at the beginning of last year, fell into conversation in the train with a banker who was returning to Bromberg from an audience with the Emperor. This gentleman told him that he had spent one evening at the theatre, where he had seen Oscar Wilde's "Salomé," and he described the extraordinary impression it had produced on the audience. This seems to have been as great as that which was produced in the Paris

MADAME DUPOIRIER OF THE HOTEL D'ALSACE, WHO WAS KIND TO OSCAR WILDE DURING HIS LAST DAYS.

Salon by the exhibition of the pictures forming Tissot's illustration of the Life of Christ. "I too," said the banker, "though I am a hard-headed man of business, I felt like doing extraordinary things. I felt like springing up in my seat, and shouting out, and waving my arms. Such a mental convulsion I never felt within myself, never thought I could feel in myself." The friend then began to refer to Wilde's history, and discovered that the banker did not even know the name of the author of "Salomé," and had never heard a single word about his life!

Amongst literary Germans this ignorance does not, of course, prevail. There, thanks to the activity of the devoted Doctor Meyerfeld of Berlin, one of the foremost of German critics, Wilde's reputation is founded on a solid exposition of his literary achievements. Meyerfeld has rendered great services to his memory, not only by writing about the man and the artist, but by defending his memory against the literary harpies of his country who have sought to snatch profit from the public interest. Every German scribbler has his contribution on Wilde to the periodicals, but Meyerfeld is there to bludgeon the traffickers back into their dens.

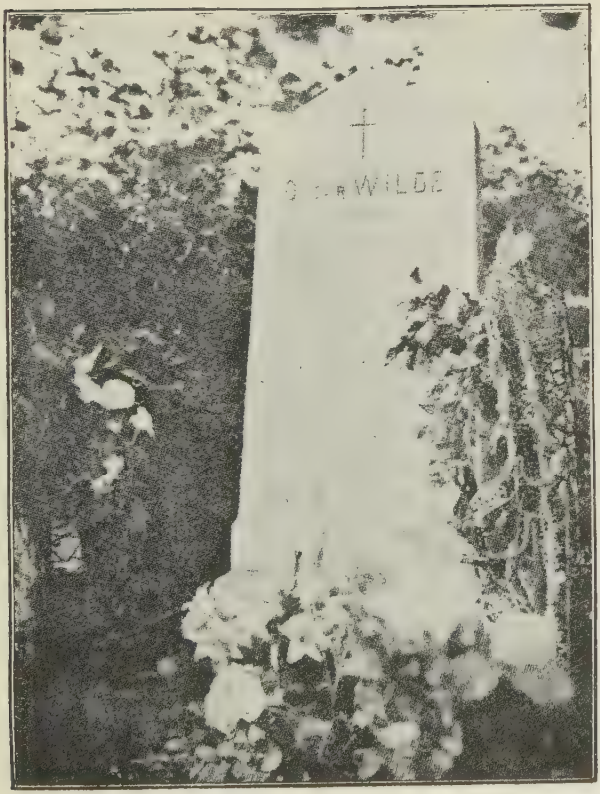
Yes; the death, occurring when it did, was indeed tragic. There are those who hold it as sad

in reality as the realistic parable in which Zola describes, by means of the death of Gervaise, the certain destruction of those in whom the power of resistance has been destroyed by unjust circumstances. One might change one word in Zola's tragic page, and write :

"Mais la verité était qu'il s'en allait de misère, des ordures et des fatigues de sa vie gâtée."

"Sa vie gâtée" : that was it.

These circumstances may afford satisfaction to the moralists and the unscientific : to those who have the cult of literature, and that patriotism which desires to see England take a foremost place also in the intellect of the world, they can bring nothing but poignant regret. These cannot but deplore a loss, an unnecessary, spendthrift, wasteful loss, which deprives England of a genius who, as what we observe to-day on the Continent incontestably establishes, could have restored—having found himself—our literature and our stage to the rank of supremacy from which for centuries past they have been degraded.



OSCAR WILDE'S GRAVE AT BAGNEUX.

APPENDIX

OSCAR WILDE AT CHICKERING HALL

Mr Oscar Wilde delivered on Monday, at Chickering Hall, a lecture on "The English Renaissance," which might fairly be called a success. In the present days of easily manufactured notoriety a young man who has managed to establish a doubt in the minds of the public as to whether he is a profound thinker or an utter fool may be said to be on the high road to a very substitute for fame, and this is what Mr Wilde had previous to his lecture succeeded in doing. The difficulty with his future career is likely to be that his lecture solves the doubt, and that he will be unable to keep alive any curiosity on the subject. When we say that he solves the doubt we mean, of course, that he is a profound thinker—not by any means, to parody a phrase of his own, a thinker of unthought thoughts, but of thoughts thought and expressed too, for that matter, a great number of times before, though not thought nor expressed so profoundly as by Mr Wilde, nor in his own manner. To say that the æsthete is a disciple of Ruskin gives a meagre idea of the chameleon-like power of imitative reproduction which he displays. His hospitable mind has opened its doors to Ruskin, Millais, Holman Hunt, Dante Rossetti, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Gautier, William Morris, Burne-Jones, Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, Walt Whitman, Goethe, and Gilbert and Sullivan. It may seem at first that it

would be difficult for even a deep young man to find a common basis for an æsthetic movement in all these ; but Mr Wilde is not only deep enough for this, but far too deep to explain what the common basis is or what he has to do with it himself. Under these circumstances, and at the risk of violating Mr Wilde's fundamental maxim of criticism — that the function of the critic is to hold his peace at all times and in all places—we will venture to offer a suggestion or two in explanation of the somewhat mysterious phenomenon presented by Mr Wilde's lecture tour.

When Mr Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites set about reforming public taste in England they were forced to enter upon something very like a crusade. Almost every canon of art criticism that existed had to be demolished, and its opposite established in its place. Springing up in a community strongly impregnated with moral and religious ideas, it is no wonder that the teachings of the school should have taken a religious tone. Appeals to the love of beauty alone would hardly have aroused the dull British Philistine from his contented, vulgar lethargy. To touch him at all it was necessary to stir his conscience ; and the forerunners of the æsthetic movement—who, by the way, were all sincere men, and loved art themselves with a semi-religious fervour—became the founders of a proselytising church, a sort of artistic Rock of Ages in the weltering and waste of the British Philistinism. They brought the pure milk of the Word to the heathen, showed him his errors, touched his soul, awoke him to the new life, lifted him out of the mire of sin in which he lay wallowing, and showed him the true path. The unconverted heathen mocked and raged, as the heathen always do, and set up mere false gods in the shape of bad pictures, and ridiculed the true faith in the columns

of their heathen organ, *Punch*. They could not butcher the apostles, or give them to wild beasts to devour, but they inflicted upon them all the social persecution that the mild manners of modern times permit, by making them have a thoroughly "bad time." The persecution had its natural effect in strongly stimulating the devotion and zeal of the sect, and no one who has given any attention to its writings or teachings can have failed to notice the sacerdotal tone assumed by it—a tone of which there is a faint echo in Mr Wilde's platitudes and paradoxes, and even in his dimly religious voice.

Everybody knows now how the Church spread; how little by little the old Philistines were converted and new-born Philistines were baptised into the new faith. The rage of the heathen disappeared, and on every side the galleries of the old religion were cleared of their Philistine rubbish, and swept and garnished to make room for what was purely true and precious in art.

The success of any church in converting the heathen, of course, puts it in a different attitude towards society from that which it occupies in the days of adversity. The Philistine, who, though a man of sin, has a good deal of sense, always keeps his eyes on the children of light, and is always willing to take his cue from them when he finds it necessary to do so, and when he does do this he does it handsomely. The Philistine is after all the same flesh and blood as the rest of us, though so hopelessly sunk in the mire. After a time he too joined the Church, and, so far as fashionable society in England is concerned, it may be said to have been converted for ten years. The connection between the decorative or æsthetic movement, which Mr Wilde, with delightful impudence, is undertaking to further in this country, and the old Pre-Raphaelite crusade is

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easy enough to trace. It too has been completely successful, and is in full possession of the walls, floors, ceilings, and furniture of the "best society" in England, and to a great and increasing extent of the United States. Mr Wilde, therefore, instead of being, as he represents himself, a missionary preaching art to the heathen in the wilderness at the sacrifice of fortune, fame, and everything that the Philistine holds most dear, stands to art more in the relation of the fashionable preacher of the "swell" congregation to religion. To compare profane things to sacred, Mr Wilde is the Charles Honeyman of the religion of which Ruskin was the St Paul. When Ruskin preached society was Philistine, but it now forms the congregation. We all know the spirit in which we listen to the fashionable preacher—how we like to hear him denounce sin, and expose the vanity and frivolity of worldly pursuits, the money-loving and commercial spirit of the age, and how true we feel it to be that collections ought to be taken up for the conversion of others. There is the same vagueness too about the articles of Mr Wilde's faith that there is about those of the Reverend Charles. The æsthetic principles which he announced on Monday at Chickering Hall were in a strange jumble, the chief merit of which lay in the serene superiority of the lecturer to the confusion which he produced in the mind of his audience, and which we notice has led one reporter of it to imagine that he said that English æstheticism sprang from the union of Hellenism with the romantic spirit, "as from the marriage of Faust and Helen of Troy sprang the beautiful Lady Euphemia."

Mr Wilde, again, represented himself as being determined to carry on the warfare of art against Philistinism to the bitter end, but really he brings peace

rather than a sword. Art, when first introduced among the Philistines, did lead to an internecine struggle. It introduced discord into every family—set father against son, and mother against daughter. It inspired passions in the simple-minded, barbarous Anglo-Saxon which nothing else but religion and the study of language had ever produced. But it is easy to see from the reception we have given to Mr Wilde that he is not an iconoclast, or in any danger of suffering the fate of a martyr. He is, as we have said, spreading the true faith in Art, much as a fashionable preacher spreads the true faith in the Gospel. He and his congregation are really all of one mind, but he has the gift of expression, the sweet eloquence which the successful preacher must always have, and he thoroughly appreciates the value of extravagance in attracting attention. He is glad to have even his congregation laugh at him, if they will only join in his prayer to the Steel of Toledo and the Silk of Genoa, or acknowledge the supreme importance of the " gaudy leonine beauty " of the sunflower and the " precious loveliness " of the lily.

It makes little difference whether Maudle is the caricature of Mr Wilde or Mr Wilde a realisation of Maudle. It is the doubt which gives reality to both. There is nothing that shows Mr Wilde in his true light so completely as his great appreciation of Bunthorne. Bunthorne is an impostor, an " æsthetic sham," and his existence every night tends to make the whole æsthetic movement ridiculous. Now, it is very true that all new moments in art or poetry have had their parodists and their satirists. But it never occurred to any reformer before Mr Wilde that it would be a good thing to encourage parody and satire as a means of keeping the ball going. The same manager " runs " the lecture tour of the æsthete and the operatic com-

pany which heaps ridicule upon him. You hear the true Gospel at Chickering Hall, and join the mocking laughter of the heathen at the absurdity of it at the Standard Theatre. We must say that, to our mind, Mr Gilbert has the best of the joke. Real reformers have usually hated, as only just men can hate, those who sneer at reform. It was left to Mr Wilde to discover the commercial value of ridicule in the good cause. Mr Wilde is a poet, a preacher, and a man of the world. As a man of the world, he knows that the true way to attract attention is to shock people's sense of decency, and the true way for a preacher to become fashionable is to make the Word pleasant and soothing to fashionable people, and that a very good substitute for fame is the notoriety attracted by silliness. Mr Wilde is an essentially foreign product, and can hardly succeed in this country. What he has to say is not new, and his extravagance is not extravagant enough to amuse the average American audience. His knee-breeches and long hair are good as far as they go ; but Bunthorne has really spoiled the public for Wilde.

12th January 1882. *The Nation.*

OSCAR WILDE'S LECTURE IN ENGLISH PROVINCES ON THE "HOUSE BEAUTIFUL"

He used to commence his lecture on the "House Beautiful" by saying that he would refrain from "giving a definition of the abstract principle of beauty"; that metaphysicians, rhetoricians, and poets had all tried to do so in vain.

"There was a time," he continued, "when every house was beautiful. There was once a spirit which

touched everything into loveliness." The right basis of every artistic movement was to "value and honour handicraft." Delicacy of hand, refinement of imagination, the eye to see beauty, and the power to transmit that beauty to others—unless all this were honoured "art might become the luxury of a few people, or it might be the fashion of a few seasons," but it would be nothing more. He referred to what he had seen in the Chinese quarter of San Francisco, where all the little vessels and cups of the Chinese were articles of the greatest taste, while he in his hotel had his tea given him in a "delf cup of the size of half a brick." All rules for decoration must be general. Æstheticism is not a style, but a principle. All rules applicable to decoration must be "broad, workaday, and not abstruse." Mr William Morris's first rule was: "Not to have anything in the house but what one knows to be useful and what one thinks to be beautiful." "What strange ornaments," said Oscar Wilde, "are to be seen in the houses of very charming people. Wax flowers" (here people used to laugh)—"horrible things perpetrated in Berlin wool" (*Laughter*)—"and the endless array of antimacassars, which seems to reduce life to 'the level of an eternal washing-day.'" (This was always applauded, and became a household phrase.) The lecturer then quoted Mr Morris's second principle: "Not to have anything but what is felt to have been a joy to someone to make it, and a joy to others to use it." "This table-cloth," said Oscar Wilde, pointing to the one on the table in front of him—which was usually a showy one of indescribable pattern—"must have been made by someone who worked under permanent depression of spirits." (*Laughter.*) The third principle was: "Not to have in one house any imitation of one texture in another." Wood painted like stone, paper appearing

like marble, and other things which Ruskin condemned so forcibly. For a man, said Ruskin, to have on the walls of his hall a marble paper was extremely immoral. He (Oscar Wilde) would leave out of his dictionary all fine ethical words about art. To him the "morality of art was its beauty, the immorality its ugliness," and that could be said without going into graver moral questions. We ought not, then, to think, but to be absolutely certain that there is nothing in our house which is not useful and that is not beautiful. He was often asked: "What is the true artistic colour?" He was unable to reply. All colours were artistic. He smiled when he read in the newspapers that such and such a colour would be a fashionable one for the season. As in music, so in colour: one note was not more beautiful than another. The combination of notes was music, the combination of colours was beauty. How we should smile if it were to be announced that B Flat would for some months be the fashionable note—what a dreary lookout it would be! But quite as depressing was it to be told that one particular colour would be fashionable for the season. It was essential to true decoration that there should be a knowledge of background, of neutrals, and of tertiary colours, so as to produce the impression without glare. Gold was a neutral, its object to give tone, but it had been made into a primary colour. It was always safe to treat walls as background and keep bright colours for detail. Porcelain, silk, and such-like textures were best for bright colours Colour not merely makes things beautiful, but is often the substitute for architectural features, which in themselves are not possible to us. "The fault of most rooms," Mr Wilde said, "was in their being too high." He then had a good-humoured tilt at the scientific doctors who advocate high rooms.

Ventilation was what was wanted. You need not light your rooms with five glaring lights of a chandelier hanging from a "plaster vegetable" in the centre of the ceiling. There was no reason why rooms should not be lighted with candles or oil-lamps. The lecturer then went on to describe how a room too high or too low should be treated in its decoration. The stencillings of Japan, designed by the first Japanese artists, were then described. Large windows and windows coming too low were condemned. Plate-glass gives glare, but not light. Glare is to light what noise is to music. When ugly windows are obtained, then the upholsterer is sent for to see what he can do. The upholsterer has no scruples. He brings a pole as heavy as a ship's mast, and massive rings thereon to support a curtain—not to fall into folds and reach only to the floor—but to trail and to be looped with woollen bands; and all other kinds of wickedness the upholsterer designs. (*Laughter.*) The beauty of small panes and coloured glass was then pointed out. Coloured glass made "light beautiful." Dreary, white, shining marble chimney-pieces were next satirised, and were described as things which it would be wicked to sell and still more wicked to give away. The problem was: What to do with them? Mirrors came in for unqualified condemnation. A room was supposed to have four walls. All sorts of fantastic shapes were given by a mirror reaching from the chimney-piece to the ceiling, and every straight line was deflected. Mirrors were one of the unpunished crimes of the nineteenth century. He did not want to say anything more severe than that. When the present century came in there was a feeling that all useful things should be made as ugly as possible. Useful things ugly, and then the rooms filled with a number of delicate little luxuries. The common things

of life ought to be made so beautiful that nothing shall hereafter be called common. The qualities of good furniture were that it should be well made, be comfortable, and be made by people of refinement for people of refinement. There was something in art besides honesty. Honesty was not a principle but a condition of art. Furniture well made, and of good materials, grew more beautiful the longer you had it. The most comfortable chairs were not the softest. In conclusion, the lecturer, in an eloquent peroration, showed how all possibility of having in England beautiful things depended upon the honour and dignity given to handicraft. It was here that the lecturer became most effective and impressive, and most earnestly did he plead that handicraft might have a place in the education of every child. We in England have made a great mistake, he continued. The attention of children has been fixed to books when it ought not to have been. Who cannot remember, when a child, looking at a blacksmith at work or spending an hour in a carpenter's shop ? Every child likes to see something made, and likes to make something. A school should be the most beautiful place in every town and village—so beautiful that the punishment for undutiful children should be that they should be debarred from going to school the following day. In all schools there should be a constant succession of new and delightful things, so that children could not weary or become indifferent to anything that was beautiful. He considered that it would be a very good thing if some of the bits of decorative art which were stored up at South Kensington and similar museums were lent to the schools throughout the country for the edification and delight of the children. There was no place so absolutely depressing as a museum. There was a better use of art than

looking at it on a rainy day. Give a child something to make, and he would be happy—and a perfectly happy child would be a perfectly good child. Children might be taught to do something in wood, something in leather, in pottery, in furniture, in decorative art, and in metal-working. The artistic power of every child was great. The problem of the age was the noisy boy who would not go to school nor learn his lessons, but spent his time in throwing stones at windows. What was the matter with him? He had simply discovered that he had hands, and that they were given him for something. Many people do nothing with their hands but cover them with kid gloves. The human hand has marvellous powers. Every child loved beautiful things. The taste of a child was often perfectly faultless. A child knew that what was beautiful must be good. If such children were taught the nobility of all handicraft that lesson would be quite as important as teaching them the population of Madagascar, or the names of the Saxon kings, or in the incidents in the private lives of people who never lived. Open the child's eyes to see the beauty of land and sea, of the flight of birds, of the budding of a flower, and the falling of a leaf, and they will feel it a joy, and desire to communicate that joy to others—and almost every noble lesson of life will have been learned. They will learn to love all that is beautiful and to hate all that is ugly. Moral tales do not accomplish much good. The boy who throws a stone does not always fall into the well, as the tale states. This is soon discovered, and then comes the revolt of life against literature. Every child cannot be made into an artist. The lecturer closed his remarks by quoting the words of " one who loved beauty more than anything else "—John Keats, who, replying to someone who asked him

to venerate some principle or other, said : " I venerate only the Supreme Being, the memory of great men, and the principle of Beauty."

OSCAR WILDE'S LECTURE IN DUBLIN ON " THE VALUE OF ART IN MODERN LIFE "

WITHIN the last few years in that country and elsewhere there had been a strong development of artistic feeling and artistic beauty in the houses, not alone of the wealthy, but of all classes. A better perception of form and colours and a greater sense of harmony ran through every room. Certain old ornaments had disappeared. The wax peach no longer ripened in the glass shade. Cumbrous and useless furniture had been more and more laid aside. He would endeavour to show the scientific basis of the movement. Modern science taught that every organism, whether plant or animal, sought its proper environment. There was no reason why mankind should not seek for theirs. Plato in his " Republic " taught that children should be brought up in the midst of fair sights and sounds, so that the soul might be brought naturally into harmony with the eternal world. Formerly abstract definitions of the beautiful were aimed at. But the artistic temperament was better developed by beautiful surroundings—by giving a perception of every particular beauty. He was not sure that the real meaning of art was understood. Most people imagined that it was in some way synonymous with ornamentation. But ornamentation was merely a branch of art. Art was primarily a question of construction, next of adaptability to a purpose, and lastly of proportion. Within the last

few years ornamentation had become an enemy of art. Some of the most beautiful things were entirely without ornament. In opposition to this they saw vases and articles of pottery beautiful in form, but covered with meaningless landscapes and sprawling flowers. The manufacturers said the public would not buy the things unless they were covered with ornament. Another thing which hindered artistic development. was the wrong use of materials. They saw looking-glasses framed in plush and painted with flowers. Plush was chiefly good for the delicate folds that it afforded, and the merit of a looking-glass was that it reflected its object. But these effects were lost in such frames. Nature was beautiful in its exquisite details and in the pageantry of its changing moods. Nature was an ideal to itself, but, as regarded art, it was not an ideal at all. Art was not a mere imitation of natural objects. Decorative art, like music, depended absolutely on certain laws—on laws of alternation, symmetry, and series, corresponding more or less to melody in music; on laws of repetition and mass, corresponding to harmony. Nature was the rough material from which art selected. Look at the examples of old Celtic art, and at Persian, Hindoo, and other Oriental arts in their general characteristics, except Japanese. In old Celtic art there was no imitation of a single object in nature. The prohibition in the Koran of the imitation of natural objects led to an exceedingly fine school of Mohammedan decorative art. These all dealt in exquisite lines, beautiful proportions, and lovely masses of colour. Bad ornamentation had arisen from the separation of the functions of the artist, the decorator, and the workman. Ornament should never for a moment disturb outline and proportion, nor should it add to the apparent weight of anything. With regard

to materials, when wood was used curves should be avoided. The curved furniture of the Louis Quatorze period was invariably gilt, so as to look like metal. In modern English furniture they saw the mahogany writhing into all sorts of shapes, giving a sense of insecurity and heaviness. But should not art be national ? He felt obliged to say No. National art was as impossible as national mathematics. Mathematics was the science of truth and art was the science of the beautiful. Both were founded on natural laws of universal application. But the national idea might be imparted in details. The Greeks made a certain use of the honeysuckle in the ornamentation of their buildings, but now, provided the principle of decoration were adhered to, any other flower would do as well. Therefore they should not furnish their houses as if they wished to please a professor of history. If he were asked for a definition of what a really beautiful thing was, he was not sure that his answer would not be such an object as would harmonise with all other beautiful objects, no matter of what century or nation. They would agree because they expressed the same laws. Between examples of ancient Irish art and examples from the Alhambra, or from Oriental mosques of the Byzantine period, there would, therefore, be no discord. They could select from all these, and the best furnished house would be the one which could not be absolutely localised as regarded forms of art. Everything should be in proportion as to colour and form, and a mere spirit of archæology should not prevail. Why was this movement called " æsthetic " ? There was a deeper sense in that word than the merely beautiful. In past ages decorative art was symbolic and expressive of ideas. Afterwards it became simply impressive, and consequently æsthetic. In the hands of

the Greeks it became after a time simply impressive, and in the period of the Renaissance Italian decorative art took the same direction. Symbolism had a tendency to putrefaction and to the stoppage of growth ; on the other hand, when the æsthetic impulse came into play there was a constant growth and admission of new light. When art was healthy it was constantly changing in its details. To us in the nineteenth century the æsthetic side of art had more application than the symbolic. Anciently symbolism was a means of conveying ideas in novels, religion, and philosophy, but, since printing, the enormous increase of books had almost put an end to that function, and ornamentation now mainly appealed to the eye — and thereby a greater amount of beauty was attained. The beauty of a rose was not enhanced by a long botanical name. Decoration was to be distinguished from imaginative art. Decorative art emphasised its material and made it more beautiful than before ; imaginative art annihilated its material. They did not regard the canvas of a picture or the stone of a piece of sculpture. Again, they could place a piece of decorative art where they liked, but they could not do so with a picture. They had to hang a picture where they could see it under certain conditions of light and shade. Decorative art depended largely on traditions, whereas the art of the picture or the statue was purely individual. Decorative art was purely impressive, like music. They did not ask what a piece of music meant, but how it affected them. But imaginative art expressed not merely the facts of nature but the wonderful power of the hand and eye of the artist. What chiefly constituted the artist was his power of vision. He thought that in art schools here there was too much use of hard outline. The Japanese artists did better by

teaching their students to use a soft brush, and also by making them paint from the shoulder, without any rest for the wrist. The Greeks discovered what was beautiful, but the Dutch school of artists were the first to discover that ugly objects might be made beautiful. There was no object in life so hideous that it might not become beautiful under certain conditions of light and shade. What the artist should do is to watch for the moment when indifferent objects became thus transformed. Modern painters were too much in the habit of taking subjects from history and literature and of resorting to symbolism. There was also too great a tendency to special subjects. At a London exhibition a young artist gained great *éclat* by a picture in which he introduced in the foreground three silver birch-trees. For a while afterwards the public would have nothing but silver birch-trees. The artist wisely remonstrated against this, and painted a picture with trees of a different kind, which he exhibited, and was informed by a dealer that a gentleman was ready to pay him his own price for it if only he would put three silver birch-trees in the foreground. (Here the first laugh was taken.) The practice of decorative art ennobled labour, and contained within itself an enormous store of economic wealth, owing to the extent to which the value of the material was enhanced by the work of the artist. It was always possible for a nation by artistic power to give to the commonest material vastly increased value. There was no reason why we in Ireland should not do this. There was in all the Celtic races this power of decoration. Whether they viewed the remains of ancient art in the Royal Irish Academy or in the museums of Northern Europe, they would be struck by the far greater sense of beauty evinced in the early Celtic work than in the old English

art, which was deficient in delicacy and sense of proportion. (*Applause.*) And there was no reason why they should not show that those perceptions of the beautiful, and capacities of delicate handling as to hue and colour, were not dead.

OSCAR WILDE'S LECTURE IN DUBLIN ON "DRESS"

It was strange that, whereas so much attention had been paid to the decoration of our homes, very little care had been bestowed on the national dress of our men and women. No matter how beautiful a house might be, it should be only a background for the men and women who dwell in it. The beauty of the house was abnormal so long as the art of dress was neglected. When he called it an art he did not exaggerate its importance. To be dressed well requires that one should be a master of colour and form. The beauty of a dress consists in its giving expression to the grace and freedom of the body. It should suit and yield to its every motion, and not be a mere prison in which the body is confined. Before there is any reform in our national costumes the natural motions and functions of the body must be better and more widely understood. A great aid to the general acquiring of that necessary knowledge would be the teaching of drawing. A desire to draw is natural; no boy or girl fails to cover its lesson book with pictures of its parents and friends or of the house over the way. Writing, on the contrary, is an acquired art, and there is no reason why children should not be taught drawing as they are taught writing. They might commence by drawing

plane figures, squares, or cubes, proceeding afterwards to the study of the human figure—in the first place from the casts of the ancient Greek statues. They would then learn that the waist, for instance, is the most delicate and graceful curve in the entire body, and that it is not necessarily beautiful if it happens to be small. Nothing is beautiful because it is simply small or large, and the waist is beautiful only when it is in perfect proportion with the other parts of the human figure. Similarly the foot is beautiful when it gives the idea of being the firm basis on which the body rests ; and the hand is not beautiful in proportion to its smallness, but when its curves and those of the wrist are graceful and unbroken. The poets, who are generally blamed for everything (here the first laugh was usually heard), are probably responsible for the idea that a small waist is necessarily beautiful. Chaucer and Dunbar are amongst the guilty : one talks of a lady whose waist was " as small as a willow wand." In the same way, it is almost impossible to take up a novel in which the lady has not extremely small hands and feet.

The child who has learned to draw will know that the effect of horizontal lines upon the figure is to reduce its apparent height, whilst that of vertical lines is to increase the height. The same principle, as is well known, holds in the case of a house. If a ceiling be too high—a fault very common in our modern houses —it is easy to reduce its seeming height by running any broad band, such as a dado, horizontally round the room. If, on the contrary, the ceiling be too low—as occasionally occurs in very old houses—proportion may be given by making the leading lines vertical. In dress, if a lady be too tall, a broad belt or sash lessens her apparent height ; while, if she happens to be small, the lines of her dress should be as much as possible

vertical. A person looking at the fashion plates of the period of the First French Empire will be struck by the apparent height of the beautiful ladies of the time. The cause is that the skirts were lengthened by shortening the waist. As regards the question of colour, he should remind them that in decorating a room—unless it was wanted to be a museum—they should have some scheme of colour. The same holds true of dress. He thought that at most three colours, unless very exquisitely harmonised, were as many as could be safely employed, for it should be understood that any contrasting colour concentrated attention on a mere detail. Vivid colours in ribbons or feathers in the head-dress are dangerous also, because they interfere with the attention, and attract undue observation. Large checks should not be worn, as they render any irregularity of the figure at once apparent. Recently he had gone into a shop in London to purchase some stamped velvet or plush. After a lengthened search he was obliged to ask the shopman to show him something that would not require a man some ten or twelve feet high to be in proportion. The figures on all that the shopman had shown were large enough for the paper of a considerable building. Anything else, the shopman said, was unfashionable. When he mentioned the word "fashion" he named the greatest enemy of art in this as in all other centuries. It is a giant that puts men in chains. Art seeks to give expression to individuality; fashion insists upon every man doing as every other man. If there were anything beautiful or excellent in fashions they would not have to be changed every six months. The Egyptians had preserved their national dress for nearly 2000 years; the Greeks maintained theirs for over 900. With us a young lady spends her pocket-money buying a bonnet which she wears for a few

weeks, to the admiration and rage of her neighbourhood; and then comes her dearest friend, who mentions, quite casually, that nobody wears a bonnet of that shape or colour now. (*Laughter.*) More money is spent on bonnets alone than would suffice, if the figures were made public, to drive the husbands of the kingdom to despair. (*Applause and laughter.*) It is not that they are beautiful. Time was when great merchants and nobles dressed their wives in brocades and cloth of gold. More money in proportion is expended now, because fashion changes so often. The economy would indeed be great if dress could be rendered permanent. In England, as in every other country, the national costume was permanent until the end of the sixteenth century. Catherine de Medicis, who had been accused of nearly every possible crime, was guilty of the introduction of the corset and the farthingale. The former was an iron band, very broad, and arranged so as to be fastened with links and hooks at the back and under the shoulders. In it the body was iron-bound like an American trunk. The farthingale was a cage, sometimes of osier, at times strengthened with iron ribs, that depended from the waist and kept the dress extended to a monstrous degree. A lady thus attired would occupy all to herself as much room as would suffice for a moderate political meeting. (*Laughter.*) The same fashion may be seen caricatured in Hogarth's works, and in our time it has been known as the crinoline. It is now disused, and upon that at least we might congratulate ourselves. But what was the meaning of that wicked thing known as the dress improver? (*Applause and laughter.*) Of course, none of those present were capable of wearing it, but for the benefit of others he would point out that its effect is to cut across the curve of the body just as it becomes beautiful. An ideal

dress was that of the Athenian woman in the days of Athenian glory, when she was pre-eminent in her arts and in her philosophy. They borrowed from the Orient, from which all things have come, a soft variety of woollen cloth similar to cashmere. The Assyrians, with the Oriental fondness for bright colours, dyed their dress in vivid shades. The Greeks, with more artistic feeling, discarded the colours and the horizontal lines of the Assyrian girdle, which they diminished to two small cords that served to relieve the vertical lines of the robes by retaining oblique folds in position. The lecturer described the ancient Greek costume in detail. Of course, he added, in our colder climate it would be unsuitable, but two lessons may be learned from the facts known of it. The first is that as a dress material woollen cloth is superior to any other. It is a mistake to suppose that woollen textures are of necessity clumsy and coarse. The woollen stuffs of cashmere were finer than the finest silk. The other point observable in the costume he had described is that it was undivided and unseamed. The beauty of the dress was entirely dependent upon the manner in which it was worn. The use of wool as the basis of materials for dress was greatly recommended by eminent physicians. It was cool in summer and warm in winter, whilst perfectly flexible and light. Its employment in lawn-tennis, rowing, and cricketing clothes might be instanced as an example. A cloak with a hood, not intended merely for an ornament, was a very ancient and most admirable garment. It was decidedly Irish in very remote times, as their sculptures in Kilconnell Abbey proved. The hood should be made to protect the head from rain—that was its use. A head-dress as at present worn is rarely of any advantage to the wearer. It generally assumes the form of a stuffed bird perching

upon a small piece of tulle. (*Laughter.*) Recently he saw in one of the French journals a drawing of a bonnet, with the note underneath : " With this style the mouth is worn slightly open." (*Laughter.*) That was surely the *ne plus ultra* of folly. (*Applause.*) Referring to the subject of male attire, the lecturer declared that the tall top-hat was as wicked and monstrous as the worst of the feminine articles of apparel. It was supposed to give very great respectability on week-days and irreproachable orthodoxy on Sundays. (*Laughter.*) High-heeled boots were next vigorously condemned, and Wilde concluded his lecture by impressing on his hearers that beauty in dress consisted in the perfect adaptability of the garments to the needs of the wearer.

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The Satyricon of Petronius. (A translation attributed to Wilde by the publisher in Paris who also issued "What Never Dies.")

Ego Te Absolvo, *Old Bishop's*, and *The Orange Peel.* (Three stories published in an American magazine, over Wilde's name, shortly after his death. They have been translated into French, and published by P. V. Stock in a volume containing "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" and the five tales included in "The Happy Prince." The translator, M. Albert Savine, however, in a note says: "Nous les traduisons ici bien que l'authenticité nous en paraisse éminemment suspecte.")

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NOTE.—This list of translations does not profess to be complete. It is compiled mainly from the writer's own collection.

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